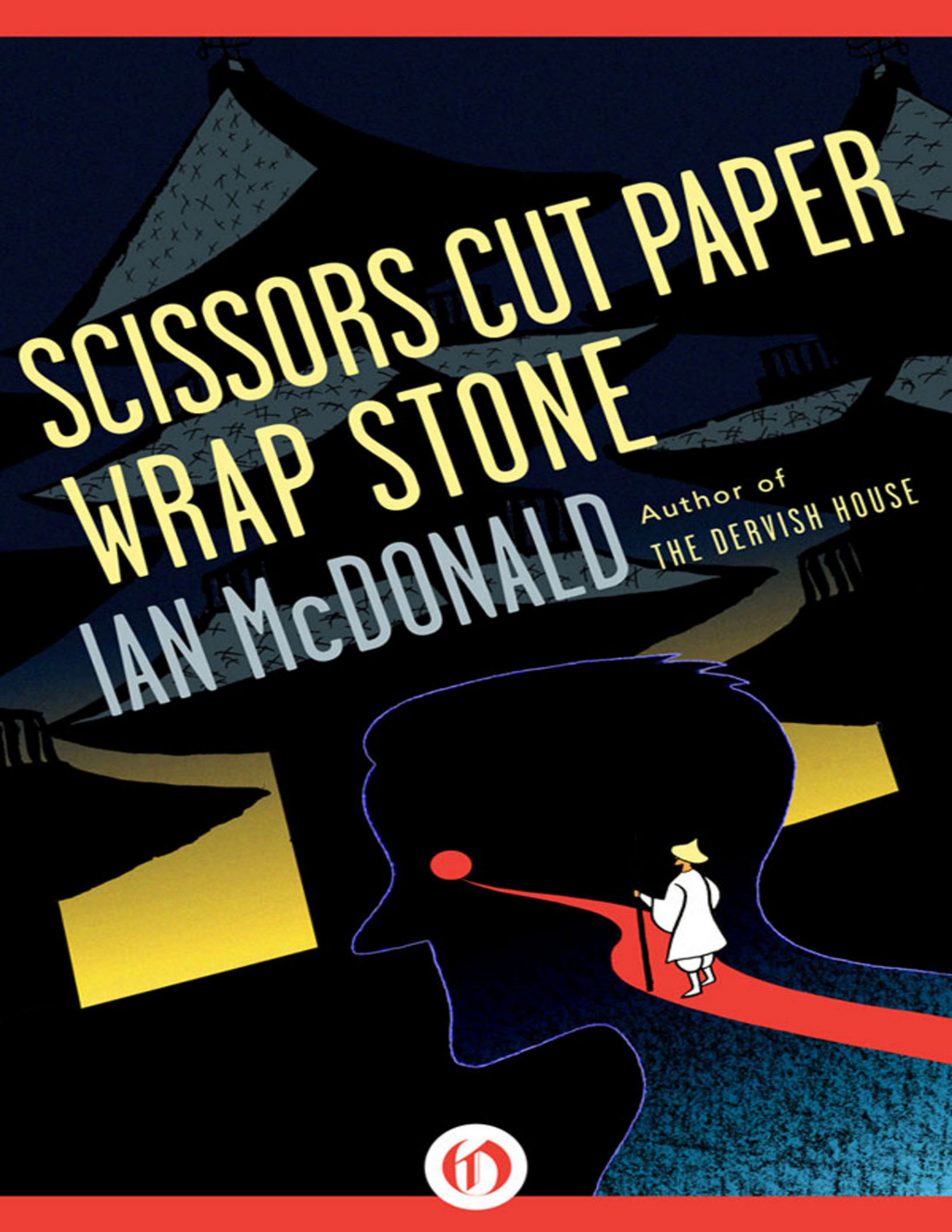


# SCISSORS CUT PAPER WRAP STONE

Author of  
THE DERVISH HOUSE



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# Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone

**Ian McDonald**



# Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[The Tear by Ian MacDonald](#)

[Thanks and Acknowledgments](#)

[A Biography of Ian McDonald](#)

THE BERLITZ-KIKOYAN SKULL-TAP GIVES me idiomatic Tokyo-Bay argot, but the pilgrim's prayer, as ancient as the pilgrimage is long, defies easy translation: "Homage to Kobo Daishi, source of spiritual yearning, guide and companion on our quest." So much more elegant and simple in Japanese: *Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo*; easy on my lips as I kneel before the image in the Daishi Hall for the short preparatory ceremony. The muttered chains of repetitions, mantralike, slip between self and spirit, ease the excruciating self-consciousness of an over-tall, over-here, Euro. With red hair. At an alien altar.

The first thing prayer changes is the prayer, Masahiko—companion, guide, fellow pilgrim on this thousand-mile journey—tells me. And the last thing also. I hope so. I pray so.

There is no longer an incumbent at Temple One; a big Neo-Shinto shrine has wedged itself into the compound of the old Buddhist temple like a cuckoo chick into a sparrow's nest; its priest maintains grounds and buildings out of a sense of architectural and historical respect, but wary of offending the spirits, he does not assume any religious responsibilities. Our albums—the pilgrim's passport, to be stamped in vermilion with the official seal of each of the eighty-eight sacred sites—are marked by a coin-in-the-slot robot much in need of a new coat of paint. A sluglike feral zoomorph—brilliant yellow, with long trailing blue tendrils—feeds parasitically on the muscle-unit, tracking spirals of silver slime. The bright red stamp on the pure white paper is reassuringly exact, definite, bold, a statement of resolution. No going back now. We are committed. All the world knows the proverb that a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. What is not so widely known is that here, at Temple One, one takes that single first. Here also at Temple One is the last step, a thousand miles and eighty-eight temples later. Like the quest for enlightenment, the Shikoku pilgrimage is a circle, never beginning, never ending. Destinations are false goals; it is the Way Gone that matters.

We pause before the temple gate where we have left the bicycles to pay our respects at the Shinto shrine. The shrine is busy. Prayers for this, supplications for that, requests for healings, petitions for aid, for small, cybernetic miracles, for offenses to be pardoned and misfortunes lifted. It

does not do to affront the simulacra of the ancestors. Linked through the Life Assurance Company AI matrix into the international datawebs, they can shovel a truly cosmic amount of shit your way. Religions, like pilgrimages, go in circles. As the Shingon Buddhism of Kobo Daishi—the saint in whose literal footsteps we follow—overwhelmed and absorbed primitive ninth-century Shinto, so twelve centuries later a renascent techno-Shinto of persona-simulation and soul-taps has pushed Buddhism into a seemingly terminal decline. What say the attenuated joys of nirvana against the recording and storing of memory, experience, and emotion with the hope of someday breaking through into true personality reconstruction?

Worshippers stare as we approach the massed banks of miniature television screens, each bearing the simula of some dear departed summoned back from informational limbo. Photographs, mementos, memorabilia, the toys, tricks, and trivia of living are epoxied to the television shells. The accepting, enfolding spirit of the Daishi Hall is shattered; my fears of being an alien in an alien place return redoubled. Masahiko reassures me. It is our white robes and sedge hats—the mark of a pilgrim, a *henro*—that are attracting attention. They are a rarity these days. Once thousands made pilgrimage each year; now if there are fifty geriatrics in a chartered coach it is a sign of mass spiritual revival. Once the ashes of the dead were taken to Mount Koya, across the Inland Sea in Wakayama Prefecture, Shingon's most holy place, to ensure rebirth in Amida's Pure Land in the West. Now on the local shrine anniversary, those insured with the big corporations come to have a year of recorded memory, emotion, experience downloaded from their soul-taps into the biocores.

I clap my gloved hands three times and run my yencard through one of the readers suspended on webbing straps from the lower branches of the cedars. At the beginning when everything can seem like an omen, you need all the good karma you can get. I wonder: Mas says that Japan's population has been falling steadily since the advent of soul-tap technology; have the life assurance companies accidentally created a dearth of spirits to be reincarnated?

As we leave the shrine an old woman comes pushing through the crowd in the gateway to press some small coins into our hands. She insists we accept. I am reluctant, Masahiko advises I take them. They are *settai*, pilgrim offerings; a tradition as old as the pilgrimage itself of bestowing

small gifts upon henro: a few coins, like these, some summer fruit, a bowl of rice, a meal, a back massage. To refuse is pride. Humility of spirit is the Way of the pilgrim. Many of the ancient—and not so ancient—henro begged their way around the whole thousand miles. As etiquette demands, we give the old woman printed name slips. Mas's excites great interest, being a slip of ten-second smartplastic depicting Danjuro 19: *Kabukiman!*—his creation and Japan's number one *anime* superhero—transforming into one of his Classical Theater alter egos to battle evil. My humbler contribution is received no less thankfully: the old woman tells us the ceiling of her master bedroom is papered with henro name strips collected over several decades. Her continued physical vigor she attributes totally to their spiritual efficacy.

Outside the temple gate, we unlock the bikes. I check the bags—Mas's assurance that no one would dare steal under the gaze of the guardian deities who flank the gate, sifting souls, does not convince me. The demon box is where I left it, untampered with, untouched. Safe. Of course. But why does the best man at a wedding check his pocket for the ring every twenty seconds?

Ryōzen-ji's attendant town is busy; narrow streets overhung with neons and tattered plastic banners advertising European consumer electronics are crowded with trucks and pickups both hydrocarbon and muscle-powered. Smart market stalls and street vendors' booths hung with long, lovely vegetables—fed on nightsoil and artificial light until unbelievably huge and ripe—remind us that, despite the close-packed midrise emergency housing thrown up to accommodate refugees from the decaying offshore corporate arcologies, this is at heart farming country. We weave an uncertain course between darting biopower mopeds, their riders' eyes grim beneath helmets and smog masks. Massive, slow-moving tractor-trailer combines intimidate the roadside stalls and lean-to shelters of streetdwellers. Even in such company, we turn heads in our fluorescent MTB gear, white hip-length henro robes and inverted bowl-shaped henro hats clipped over safety helmets. The sedge hats are inscribed in quarters with the words of a very ancient, very Buddhist poem. As the urban drawl in my tap is not up to the highly Sinicized language of classical Japanese literary style, Masahiko translates:



*For the benighted: this world's illusions.  
For the enlightened, knowledge: all is vanity.  
In the beginning was no east, no west,  
Where then, north and south?*

Draw your own conclusions, pilgrim.

The henro's staff, bell, and stole that identifies him as a layman engaged on religious works we have had to forgo. Instead we have twenty-four-gear Day-Glo Dirt-Wolf freestyle MTBs hand-calligraphied by Masahiko with prayers and proverbs for the protection of travelers. Hard physical exertion and closeness to nature is an essential part of the pilgrimage: the God head in all things is the spirit of the Daishi's mountain Buddhism. That is why the most perfect way around the eighty-eight Sacred Sites has always been on foot. But in the post-industrial Japan of the second decade of the third millennium, Buddhism is in decline, the old path is impassable in many places, and the threat from bandits and power-armored *akira* gone AWOL from local security companies increases every year. We must cover long stretches of national highway, and inns and temple lodging houses are no longer numerous. On the terrain bikes we can honor the principle of achieving enlightenment by our own sweat and, where the path remains, follow the steps of the Daishi.

The steps of the Daishi. *Dogyo Ninin*: another pilgrimage proverb, painted by Mas on the front and rear shocks. We Two, Pilgrims Together. The belief has always been that Kobo Daishi walks at the side of each pilgrim, at times unseen, at others appearing in different forms and guises, occasionally manifesting himself in the full glory of his enlightenment. *Dogyo Ninin*. In honesty, the ideograms on our forks should read *We Three*, Pilgrims Together. Another shares the Daishi's place as invisible companion. Not by virtue of grace or enlightenment or any especially spiritual quality, but because of who she is, what she is.

I last saw her—unseen guest—in Capetown.

“Can't keep away from each other, can we, Eth?” After the Marrakech Room, her agency-ware had a decade's worth of industrials with tax-bucks to dump and commissions to offer stacked up. Maslow-Huysdorp had outbid the competition (but then the Suid-Afrikan bioindustries could outbid almost anything except the European multinationals) and were

weaning her off jet lag in the shadow of Table Mountain before taking her up to Bloemfontein to survey a site. As ever, I was a skulker in the shadows of the European Embassy, this party in the Kursaal where we met an attempt to woo the emergent black entrepreneurial caste away from Pan-Islam to Dame Europa's fiscal tit.

"Karmic cycles, Eth. It is predestined that our life paths cross and recross. Round we go, and round. In a previous existence we were probably Tom and Jerry." Her face had always held too much personality to be merely beautiful. Features wide, flat, scribbled by a child's crayon, ugly-beautiful, and that soft cockatoo crest of black hair that was always always falling into her eyes. "Oh God, get me out of here. Everyone's so pretty and witty and gay. I need your uncompromising yeoman stodginess."

We walked on the beach, away from the stifling heat of the Kursaal. She slipped off her shoes and fastened them to her belt, let warm sand caress bare soles. The ocean fell and ran, fell and ran on the long beach.

"Atlantic or Indian, Eth? Where exactly does Atlantic end and Indian begin? If you're in a boat and cross the line, can you tell?"

Her entire life, it seemed then, had been made out of questions and considerations like those, of the peripheries of things.

"Heard from Mas?" she asked.

I told her that Danjuro 19: *Kabukiman!*, slayer of *ronin*, akiras, renegade robots, and Yakuza, Sword of Righteous Justice, et cetera, was now syndicated to fifteen Pacific Rim cable channels.

"Come a long way from a man, an *anime* deck, and a secret nocturnal vice," she said.

"He wants me to go on some crazy thousand-mile Buddhist pilgrimage with him," I said. "Says it would be good for my soul."

"He's probably right."

"He probably is." Even before Capetown, even before her, I had decided I would go. For my soul.

She took my hands in hers, studied them minutely.

"No more kid-glove treatment, Eth?"

"Synthetic skin. Looks better. It comes off as easily as the gloves."

"That's what frightens me, Eth."

She let go of my hands, took my face between the palms of her hands, looked into my eyes. Gently but firmly she slapped me across the left

cheek. Again and again and again, fitting her words to the tempo.

“Stupid stupid stupid boy. Always heroes and angels, isn’t it, Eth?”

She stalked away toward the lights of the Kursaal. An International Fireworks Convention in town the same time as Europa’s Three-Ring Diplomatic Circus was coming to a climax in the sky beneath Table Mountain.

“You’re not fucking worth it, Ethan Ring. There only ever was you; is that not enough?”

In the morning the assignment was waiting for me on the room fax. I called at the desk to leave a goodbye, and an apology for her. The lobby was full of hung-over black businessmen hunting down breakfast. The white receptionist said she had left before dawn.

THIS FIRST DAY OF the pilgrimage we move up the Yoshino Valley, visiting each of the temples there and staying over at Temple Ten where the priest is a relation of a relation of a friend of Mas's. This is good farming land, a many-colored land: neat fields of yellow rape, purple clover, the sheer startling viridian of rice shoots, but mostly we make our way down footpaths and tractor tracks between tall, whispery groves of sugarcane. Near Temple Three we passed a big syrup factory; rural Japan seems to have adopted the biomechanical revolution more quickly and completely than the monstrous, decaying urban sprawls. The houses that we pass, the neat hamlets, the new villages, are all green-roofed, the engineered grass has the warmth and rusticity of the old rice thatch but never needs replacing. The few remaining sheet-metal roofs are garish and sharp-edged in comparison.

I do place and people a disservice to paint them as rustic characters. These quaint hamlets and villages are the heartland of the post-industrial revolution; each green roof sports a satellite dish to keep Juniors One Two Three in touch with the orbital EmTeeVee and sports channels, all along the valley construction teams from the big telecom companies are laying new fiber-optic cables. This is telecommuter land. Those casually dressed farmers who wave to us as we wheel past are the new caste of lawyers, doctors, accountants, designers, engineers, management consultants, near-space laborers, deep-sea miners. When Mas had a sebaceous cyst removed from his back, the only human he saw during the operation was the receptionist. The cyst had been excised by a teleoperator robot controlled by a surgeon three hundred kilometers away in a country manor among the green and pleasant golf courses of Shizuoka Prefecture. "Faith healing for agnostics," Mas calls it. When he called for his checkup, even the receptionist had been replaced by a suite of interactive software. "When it descends to sticking needles into holographic simulations of the patients to make them better, it'll really be cybernetic *macumba*."

Every Eden has its serpent. Among wage-earning professional A-type males age thirty-five to fifty the most frequent cause of death is suicide, the second, exercise-induced coronaries. Death by volleyball. I suppose if I were Adam in a beautiful, perfect paradise where every need, every whim,

was catered for, without change, without challenge, I might develop a taste for apple.

Wrong god. In Buddhism, what shit you get is of your own making. You don't inherit someone else's racial midden. The doctrine of Kobo Daishi's Shingon school is that any man may achieve enlightenment in this present life, not solely after struggling through countless thousands of painful incarnations. The Japanese have always been an optimistic people. You make your own karma.

The climb out of the valley to Temple Ten is steep. Thigh muscles throb and ache. After a long day in the saddle, we do not need this. It is as if the pilgrimage is testing our constitution and resolve: the way will only get harder; are you up to it, pilgrim?

Pilgrim drops down into low gear, grabs thrustbars, leans into pedals. I think I can I think I can I think I can...

I know I can.

The altar in the Daishi Hall of Temple Ten enshrines two images, both statues of Kannon, Bodhisattva of Mercy. According to temple legend, the first was carved by the Daishi from a living tree; the saint bowed three times before each stroke of the adze. The second is a woman weaver, a refugee from some Kyoto palace intrigue, who offered the saint a cut of her cloth—hence the name Kirihata-ji, Cut-Cloth Temple—to replace his ragged clothes. In reward for her piety a purple haze descended, and she was enlightened and transformed into a statue. After our devotions, Priest Mizuno shows us both images. I murmur with properly respectful awe, though both are crude, a few rough slashes in a wooden log. I suppose one must see with the eye of faith. The point, the priest tells us, is that anyone, including women—at the time an heretical notion, dogs had a better chance of gaining nirvana—may aspire to enlightenment.

After showering and freshening up, we dine with the priest's young family. His two sons, ten and twelve, are politely gobsmacked to be in the presence of the creator of Danjuro 19: *Kabukiman!* I am certain that the smartplastic *anime* slips Mas presents to them will be as enshrined and treasured as the Daishi's images of Kannon. After tea, Mrs. Mizuno announces that our baths are ready. As I have been expecting. As I have been dreading. On the pretext of blisters I return to our room and hunt for the synthflesh. For one heart-stopping moment I cannot find it among socks

underwear shorts teeshirts weather-proofs, then my fingers close around its stubby, comforting cylinder. *This product dries to a flexible, porous, smooth finish in fifteen seconds*, say Hoffmann Helvetica Chemie Ag. Eyes firmly shut, I slip off my left glove, feel cool spray in the palm of my hand. I give it a double dose, just to be sure. Thirteen hippopotamus fourteen hippopotamus fifteen hippopotamus. Quick glance to make sure I am alone, then I close my eyes again, repeat the procedure for the right hand and go to join Mas and Mizuno, who, it transpires, is an old Soul fan. Up to our chests in hot, tangerine-scented water, we holler out Motown, Atlantic, and Stax classics in creaky three-part harmony. Mrs. Mizuno says it is the funniest thing she has heard in weeks.

The henro lodge is cool and airy, filled with the sounds and scents of late spring in the Yoshino Valley. Sleep is easily found in such a room: within seconds I have tumbled into the slumber of the righteous.

When the cry wakes me I cannot think where I am for one hideous instant. I find my fingers tearing at the scab of artificial flesh in the palm of my right hand. No. No. *Namu Daishi Henjo*; I fight the demons with the weapons of a good pilgrim. And it passes.

Masahiko is bolt upright in his bed, eyes wide, body rigid, trembling. I can see that he is deep, far below the surface of his subconscious.

“Mas...” Kneeling before him, I touch his shoulder, gently.

“No! No!” he shouts. “Leave her alone!”

“Mas?”

No answer.

“Mas...”

No answer. I sit with him until whatever storm has troubled him has passed and he has settled back into sleep. I join him, we two, pilgrims together, and sleep without any further dreams until dawn.

THE DAY IS WARM and bright as we splash across the gravel bed of the Yoshino River and follow the old henro path into the hill country. At Temple Ten valley Buddhism ends, mountain Buddhism begins. Zen is the spirit of the valleys, Shingon the spirit of the mountaintop. And as the spirit of Zen is different from the spirit of Shingon, so the sunlight and warmth of the valley give way to the more testing weather of the mountains. Gray wads of cloud move in from the west; within an hour it is raining steadily. Rain and mud, the henro's twin curses. Our legs are spattered with it, the bikes are caked with it, and our hands and faces are numb from cold rain. Rain sheets from our plastic capes and pilgrim hats. The way is steep and treacherous—bottom gear for an hour, with many portages. All head-on into wind and driving rain. Concentration is total. Misery absolute. Temple Eleven is deserted, derelict, decaying, vandalized by akiras. Among their graffiti, their beer cans, we find the remains of cooking fires, silver foil sachets of camping ready meals, condoms, needles, rotting biomotors and batteries, empty cartridges.

“I don't like this,” says Mas, clearly spooked. Pigeons explode from beneath the eaves of the ruined Daishi Hall. Some, I notice, have parasitical zoomorphs clinging to their bodies. Reading it for an ill omen, we press on.

From Eleven to Twelve is half a day's ride past two *bangai*—unnumbered temples on the pilgrimage route that are not Sacred Sites. Both, like Eleven, are deserted and desecrated. On. Uphill all the way. I find my mind withdrawing, shutting out the sensual world and its insistencies, drawing veils of memory. I am no longer conscious of the cold and rain, the ache in my thighs. I remember.

I remember his life.

I call him “he” because, though he shared the same face, the same name, the same body and mind as I, he is dead. Unarguably. Indisputably. Dead. He was killed. Not with bullets or knives or monomolecular wire in an alley in some anonymous central European city, not with drugs or poisons. He was killed with guilt. What survived him, this thing pushing its gaudily colored MTB up the side of a Japanese mountain, is only the slag. Only the ashes.

I remember...

ON THE DAY THAT Ethan Ring was conceived, West Germany won the World Cup to the refrain of Luciano Pavarotti singing *Nessun Dorma* as Nikki Ring, twenty-something, unemployed, unemployable, engaged in five minutes of intense coitus in South Mimms Services car park off the M25 with a Dutch truck driver hauling a consignment of salad vegetables.

On the day that Ethan Ring was born an armor-piercing smartbomb hit an underground shelter in Baghdad and incinerated five hundred men, women, and children while Bette Midler sang about God watching us from a distance.

On the day that Ethan Ring kissed his first girl—Roberta Cunningham at the back of Miss MacConkey's P2 class—Europe very quietly, very unremarkably, without any embarrassing mess or fuss or anyone noticing, *united*.

On the day that Ethan Ring took his first date, Ange Elliot, age thirteen, to the local Pizza Hut for a double-cheese, diet Coke, and under-the-table footsie, Doctors ten Boom and Huitsdorp of the new, respectable, fully integrated, and racially harmonious South Africa won the Nobel prize for biology in recognition of their work on designing an artificial organism that converted sugars into useful electricity—to layman Ethan and his contemporaries, a living battery.

Too tall too early, red hair—too much of it—socially crippled by acne and self-consciousness, Ethan Ring would almost certainly have grown into neurotic teenhood but for the shelter, succor, and support of the Nineteenth House kinship. From the moral ruins of the HIV-haunted nineties, strewn with the desiccated bones of broken relationships, a new sociological order had emerged of clusters of single women—separated, widowed, divorced, never partnered—joined together under a common roof against a sea of free-floating males. The kinship: average size five point three: three point two generating the income to support themselves and the average two point one career mothers who parented the children. Men come, men go at the individual partners' discretions, but are never considered part of the family unit. 2003: the kinship achieves legal recognition in the European courts. 2012: one third of all permanent relationships are kinships. 2013, early May: Nikki Ring joins the Nineteenth House gaining a telecommuting



designer of European farming magazines, a home-delivery sandwich Empress, a jewelry maker, a co-mother who has retired thankfully into parenthood out of Futures, two new daughters, one new son, a condominium on the South Coast (the eponymous Nineteenth House) with sun terrace and shared swimming pool, peace, stability, love, security; contributing: Ethan Ring. Ethan Ring gained roots; he whose prior experience of the New Europe had been Doppler blur of tail-lights punctuated by ten thousand radio jingles and the smell of scorched sunflower oil in a nation of bed'n'breakfast rooms. The fertile ground of the kinship germinated a long-dormant talent for *visualization*, for seeing ideas projected on the backs of his eyeballs and making them seeable to others. Nurtured by his ex-Futures co-mother, his talent took him through and out of Michael Heseltine Comprehensive to art college in some rainy day city in the north to study Graphic Communications. He suffered agonies of acclimatization and socialization. He contemplated leaving. He contemplated a bottle and a half of paracetamol. He found friends in time: a Japanese exchange student with a dark and secret passion for comic-book animation; a dark-haired computer junkie from the North Country who taught Ethan the necessary skills of drinking rolling joints pulling girls; his girlfriend, a fellow Graphic Communications student who looked as if her name should end with a "y" but in fact didn't.

On the day that Ethan Ring met Luka Casipriadin, Leconte Bio in Lyons discovered a technique for loading human memories, emotions, and experiences from an implanted bioprocessor onto a mainframe AI template to create an interactive simulacrum of the dead. The first immortal since ancient Greece came from Santa Rose, CA, had Made It in sugar beet, but couldn't beat the carcinoma. Her persona was alone three years in cybernetic heaven before anyone could afford to join her.

Somebody had stolen Ethan Ring's shopping. He had gone back to lock up his rustbucket of a Ford and the bags were gone from outside his first-floor flat. Life in the rainy-day city had made him stoical: microwave TVchow-4-Is made him fat and gave him wind anyway. The next day there was a knock at his door. On the landing was the girl from first-year Fine Arts you could not help noticing because she had shaved her head except for a crest of black hair that flopped into her eyes all the time.

"You could at least have made some effort."

“Pardon?”

“Knocked a few doors. Made a few routine inquiries. You could have tried a little.”

“I’m sorry. Are you sure you’ve got the right flat?”

“Okay okay, I admit it. I took your food. Me. Luka Casipriadin. I live upstairs from you. You didn’t know. Ah. It’s Georgian, originally. Casipriadin. So my father says. Can I come in?”

“You took my food? Why did you take my food?”

But she was already sitting on his curry-and-beer-stained sofa scrutinizing with the eye of first-year Fine Arts his soft-porn posters of airbrushed cyber-girls with chromium breasts. Shit shit shit piles of dirty underwear Chinese food cartons beer cans.

“One life furnished in early squalor. You know you are what you eat?”

“Unh?”

“I’m beginning to think maybe I made a mistake with you. Syllogismic logic: if I am what I eat, and you are what you eat, then if I eat what you eat, therefore I should become you.”

“So you ate my food.”

“And got fat and farted a lot.”

“Why...”

“Because you have fabulous hair I would kill for. Because you were never going to talk to me, so I had to get to talk to you. You hungry? Of course you are. I ate all your food. Come up to my place. I’ve got stuff on.”

“My stuff?”

“My stuff. Eat my food, be me. You have a name?”

“Ethan Ring.”

“Oh, classic name. I knew I hadn’t made a mistake with you.”

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A fluorescent speck clinging to a mountainside in Shikoku, I am able to tell her that she had, she did, a small mistake, a misjudgment of character, that would slowly, gradually, destroy entire lives. Sensitive dependence on initial conditions; one word, one act, can change the world. Well they named it *chaos theory*.

From the perspective of the pilgrim, this mountain land is exhilarating; the swoop from the mountaintop temples down the sheer henro path is thrilling, madly reckless. There is a great spirit in high country. Shinto peopled the peaks with ancestors and kami but clung to the valleys; Buddhism took its temples to the very mountaintops and opened the numinous to the people of the valleys. The legends attached to Shikoku's high places gives an indication of the power of the spirit of the mountains in the Japanese psyche.

A hundred years before Kobo Daishi, En the Ascetic, an early Buddhist missionary, bound a fire-breathing dragon that had been ravaging the farms and livelihoods of the people below beneath a stone on the hilltop where Temple Twelve now stands—the temple to which we are traveling along forest trails and firebreaks. Inspired by the Buddha, the boy Daishi went up to the mountain peaks above the valley of his birth—a subtemple of Temple Seventy-five commemorates the spot—and leapt from the summit, crying out, “If I am to be the people's savior, then save me, O Buddha! If not, then let me perish!” Naturally, Buddha erred on the side of mercy. To me the most meaningful legend of mountain Buddhism is that of Emon Saburo; a rich and oppressive landlord from Ehime Prefecture (a valley man, short in spirit) who shat in the begging bowl of a wandering priest—the Daishi in disguise—and thus earned the Job-like curse of losing family, friends, and fortune in a single night. Smitten by conscience, he gave all his lands to his tenants and set off in pursuit of the Daishi to beg forgiveness. But however strenuously he pursued the saint, he was never able to catch up with him. After four years and twenty circuits, he was struck by the idea that he would stand a better chance of meeting the Daishi if he reversed the direction of his pilgrimage and so met him coming. On his twenty-first circuit of Shikoku he came, near to death with cold and exhaustion, to a mountaintop. The Daishi appeared to him and absolved him

of his sins. Before dying, Emon Saburo requested that he might be reborn as the lord of his home province—then Iyo, now known as Ehime—so that he might do mighty works of good to atone for his evil deeds in this life. The Daishi picked up a small stone, wrote Saburo’s name on it, and pressed it into his hand. Then Emon Saburo died and the Daishi buried him and changed his pilgrim staff into a cedar.

Like all good stories, there is a twist in the tale. Late the next summer, the wife of the Lord of Iyo gave birth to a son; fine, healthy, beautiful, except that his left hand was clenched shut and could not be opened. A Shingon priest was summoned, who prayed and invoked the name of the Daishi over the boy. Slowly, his fist relaxed, and opened. Inside was a small stone. On the stone were written the words “Emon Saburo Reborn.”

*Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo!*

We ride up the long, shallow steps to Temple Twelve. No priest here, nor any pilgrims; we share the mountainside forest clearing with a handful of industrial robots marked with the ciphers and seals of Tokushima Prefecture Bureau of Antiquities. Beyond Twelve the gray weather breaks. Unfaltering sunshine lights our way and we go ridgerunning across the tops of the valleys and down the mountain paths. Light has always made me feel reborn. I want to do this forever.

Temple Thirteen—Dainichi-ji—is sited on a coll at the head of a valley of big, prosperous farmhouses set like scattered islands in a sea of gently undulating sugarcane and bamboo. Like Twelve, it has fallen from grace, staffed also with stolid robots in the employ of the Bureau of Antiquities. Prayers in an empty hall; a computer stamps our albums. As we click into our toe clips, lean into handlebars, a Nissan biopower pickup pulls up outside the gate in a crunch of damp gravel. A middle-aged woman with startling fluorescent green rubber boots leaps out and greets us warmly. Her name is Mrs. Morikawa. She owns a farm ten kays down the valley, but is also the official curator (part-time) of Buddhist Cultural Heritage Sites Twelve—Fifteen. Her monitors flagged her that there were henro working their way along the old pilgrim path: we are the first in three years to have followed the Daishi’s Way, would we do her the honor of staying the night as guests in her farmhouse?

We consider her offer of settai. The afternoon is almost gone. Temples Fourteen and Fifteen are eight kays distant over heavy terrain. Mas has

booked us into a drab tourist motel just outside Tokushima on the main interprovincial highway. Waiting is a warm farmhouse, country food, clean beds, hot water.

The bikes go in the back, we squeeze into the front beside Mrs. Morikawa. Gunge-tacked to the dash is a mass-produced plastic statue of the Daishi in henro robes. *Dogyo Ninin*.

As we drive through the cane plantations and bamboo, Mrs. Morikawa confesses an ulterior motive behind her gift of hospitality. Her eldest daughter is sick with an unnamed wasting disease. The doctors and their robots have offered the most advanced medical science but they admit that sicknesses such as these are as much of the spirit as of the body. She wonders: could we, would we, see her daughter? Ancient belief credits great power to the temple seals inscribed in henro albums; Mrs. Morikawa and her mother before her saw great acts of healing when pilgrims passed their albums over the bodies of the sick. Mas protests: we are not faith healers, miracle workers, shamen, *hijiri*—itinerant Buddhist holy men—we are spiritual seekers sinful as any men. We do not emulate the Daishi, merely follow his way. The woman pleads—it can do no harm. Indeed, it cannot, nor any good, if it is only a matter of calligraphy passed over a sick spirit. But I feel, I know, that it may be more. Must be more. Demons and Daishis are jealous masters where spirits are at stake. Wind stirs the tall bamboo and in the space of a few sentences the dirt road with its twists and turns has become the entrance to a moral trap so intricate, so labyrinthine, I am its captive before I am aware I have entered.

“We will do it,” I say, cutting Mas’s protests short. Mrs. Morikawa is overjoyed.

Grass roof sloping nearly to the ground, satellite dishes, comlinks, shit digesters, methane plants, syrup tanks, agricultural robots: a typical twenty-first-century Japanese country manor. A son leaves off easing the dead biomotor out of a roboplanter to store the bikes in the barn. Halfway to the house something hits me a huge, soft thump in the back. As I go sprawling on the concrete the woman picks up a black, flapping something, shouts at it, throws it away from her. With a scream of indignation, it scuttles into the barn.

A glider cat.

The woman apologizes. They recently bought a franchise. Now every time anyone calls at the house, they come swooping down from high vantages on the webs of furred skin between their fore and hind legs to investigate. As she opens the door, a black ball of fur crouched above the porch opens moon-yellow eyes and regards us balefully.

The smell of death in the sick girl's room is so strong as to be almost overpowering. It is not easily learned, but once you have the stink of it, it never quite leaves you. I cling to the door frame to steady myself.

"Won't eat, won't talk, won't let anyone help her, won't do anything but lie in her bed and swallow pills," says Mrs. Morikawa in the voice of a woman so accustomed to pain it has become an intimate friend.

The girl is fifteen, sixteen, the age it likes its victims best. Anorexia, bulimia, cognitive metabolic disorder; they have found new names and faces for it but at its heart its name has always been self-loathing, its face, self-destruction. The doctor who called it a disease of the spirit advised well. Mas swears quietly, reverently in English.

A television with a hand-sized Sony camcorder clipped to it stands on a corner shelf. Onscreen twenty-two men in shorts chase a black and white checkered ball about an astroturf field. In the bottom right corner, two faces, an old man and an old woman. The simulacra of dead grandparents, keeping watch on their beloved granddaughter from Amida's Pure Land in the West through the little Sony camera. Seeing henro in their field of vision they smile and bow to us from beyond life.

If the girl notices us as we hold our albums over her and offer prayers she makes no response. Mrs. Morikawa seems satisfied and thanks us for our time and prayers. The Daishi will save her daughter. She has faith. A faithless *gaijin*, I feel guilty, fraudulent, an itinerant rainmaker, a wandering snake-oil seller.

Over pork chosenabe—we use an old Buddhist euphemism of calling wild boar "mountain whale" to subvert meatlessness—Mrs. Morikawa's three sons and younger daughter question us about the pilgrimage. If they recognize Mas they are too well brought up to pester him with Kabukiman questions. Cakes are served, and tea. The youngest boy fetches in a big pallet of beer cans. Considering himself excused from the injunction against alcohol because he has performed a virtuous deed, Masahiko drinks freely. The others join him only out of politeness. I decline. There is a pain in my

stomach. It is not muscle cramp, it is not a foreign devil's misreaction to Mrs. Morikawa's pork chosenabe. It is the sharp-hooked horn of dilemma twisting in my guts. I can save myself and damn. I can damn myself and save.

"And Mr. Morikawa?" Mas asks, made overconfident by 8.5 percent proof.

"Dead these three years past," Mrs. Morikawa says. "He died up at Temple Eleven. Akiras had taken over the Temple; he could not stand the thought of them turning one of Shikoku's Sacred Sites into a latrine. He was a stupid man in many ways, but not so stupid as to go up against them alone. Then Tosa Securities bought out the policing contracts to the valley and as a gesture of goodwill mounted an offensive against bandits and petty warlords upcountry, including the akira chapter at Temple Eleven. It was terrible; we could hear the shooting all the way down in the valley. We could see the muzzle flashes the tracers. Eventually, my husband could not stand by and listen to them destroying his Temple anymore. He went up there to try and talk sense into them. A ToSec enforcer shot him by mistake for an akira, even though he had a white flag with him. It had only been two months since his last download; they took his tap across the Inland Sea to the Osaka Number Eleven simulator. He grew up near there. This year the premiums are up twenty percent and ToSec are sending their enforcers to every household to encourage prompt payment."

To follow as a pilgrim in a master's footsteps leaves you no choice over which way to go. You do as he would do, no matter the pain.

With apologies, I leave the somber little party for the barn. The lights come on automatically; curious kittens peep from the hayloft and come swooping down on their wings to alight on the floor beside me, rubbing and purring. It is exactly where I left it in the bottom of my left-hand bag. The organic batteries are still strong and there is a new cartridge of biodecay paper in the printer. Because any words of mine would only frighten and confuse, I say none and slip past the big farmhouse kitchen to the sick girl's room. No witnesses: I switch off television and 'corder, banish grandpa and grandma to cybernetic limbo. Moths dance on the window glass. By the light of the moon, I set up the demon box.

FRACTER GENERATION SYSTEM LEVEL THREE INTERFACED, says the demon box.

My fingers hesitate for a moment over the Qwerty symbols on the flat black face of the box. Like that other box in the legend, once this is opened, what comes out cannot be put back again.

TIFERET, I type, one slow letter at a time.

COMMIT CODE?

WHAT I TELL YOU THREE TIMES IS TRUE.

The screen blanks. My mouth is dry.

PASSWORD VALIDATED. VISUAL DISPLAY OR HARDCOPY?

HARDCOPY.

The printer shrieks. I peel off the backing strip, stick the adhesive slip to the television screen, swivel an anglepoise to illuminate the thing printed on it, and go to the side of the bed.

“Come on, daughter,” I say in English. “Time for thine eyes to see the glory of the coming of the Lord.” With my back to the chaotic un-geometries of the fracter, I open her eyelids with my thumbs.

No audible response, no tactile change beneath my fingertips. But her pupils dilate. She sees. And being seen, the fracter slips past the defenses of her consciousness into the primal presentient core of neurochemical reaction.

Minutes pass, slow, stretched, time-dilated. Her eyes close, she slips back into sleep. I am no medico, but I know the difference between this and the shallow, restless drowse from which I woke her.

Voices in the landing. Mas, Mrs. Morikawa. The bedroom door opens, a crack, a line of yellow light. They cannot see what I am doing here. I slam the door, turn the deadlock.

“Ethan?”

“Leave me, Mas. I can help her, trust me.”

“Mr. Ring?”

“It will be all right, Mrs. Morikawa. I will not harm her, I swear. Just give me this one night. Please.”

This has always been the way with the fracters: evil sown with the good. With healing and wholeness, suspicion and mistrust. What other choice did I have but to make them mistrust me? I find a chair out of the



line of sight, to sit, to wait. Nightwatch. The clustered lights of the low-orbital manufactories arc slowly overhead and I remember the life of Ethan Ring.

ALL HER MAJOR DECISIONS, she said, were made by contrail-o-mancy. Jet trails. Inbounds, outbounds, conjunctions, and near-misses. Hexagrams of the heavens. “Make a lot more sense than leaves, cards, and bones. Divination should be a product of its time. It’s only logical.”

“What do you do on cloudy days?” he asked.

“Cloudy days I don’t even get out of bed.”

At which precise moment an outbound trans-polar suborbital made a perfect thirty-two-degree trine with an inbound shuttle from Frankfurt and he fell in love with her. Having never fallen in love before, it was a pleasure to discover that *falling* was the most precise description language could offer of the sudden, shocking emotional vertigo he felt. It terrified him. It thrilled him. It was like being handed the keys to the best ride in the fairground and told to play until dawn. Thoughts of her crept unasked into every stray moment, kept him warm and horny.

“So when are you going to do something about it?” asked Masahiko the *anime* hero and Marcus Cranitch the computer junkie and his girlfriend who looked as if her name should end in a “y” and was in fact called ‘Becca and all the drinkers thinkers jokers poseurs bozos bimbos nymphos and boyos who comprised first-year B.A. Hons Graphic Communications, who had collectively and individually noticed that Luka Casipriadin was climbing the five flights of stairs between Fine Arts on one and Design on six at least four times a day.

“Do something?” said Ethan Ring, who had never considered the possibility that so splendid a creature could reciprocally love him.

“Do something!” thundered Masahiko Marcus ‘Becca-without-the-Y and the drinkers thinkers jokers poseurs bozos bimbos nymphos and boyos.

She came knocking on his apartment door one Tuesday winter evening, waltzed into his kitchenette space, and while washing down fistfuls of Rice Krispies with milk from the bottle (“They snapcracklepop on your tongue”) said, “Got something to show you. Come on,” and shoved him into a waiting taxi.

“Where?”

“Here.”

She unloaded a computer from the front seat, paid the driver.

“But there’s nothing here.” His breath steamed in the damp November cold. Spirited out without even a grab for a jacket, he shivered and wrapped his long orangutan arms around him for warmth.

“Yes there is. A building site is here. Not any building site, but the building site for the Wildwood Center, no less; the Numero Uno Leisure Shopping Development in the Industrial Northwest.”

“A building site.”

“Yeoman.” She waved. In his glass security cabin bolted to the steel exoskeleton of Wildwood, the night-watchman waved back. Razor-wire-topped metal gates slid open on creaking rollers.

“Shall we?” Bank by bank, section by section, yellow floodlamps kicked on, throwing planes and shafts of light and shadow across the rectilinear frame of girders and floors.

“Fucking hell,” said Ethan Ring.

“It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” Luka showed him into a service elevator. “But not in the biblical sense.” Up: ten twenty thirty meters into the grid of light, “Fourth floor; ladies foundation garments, rubber hosiery, and exotic millinery.” She ducked under the safety gate, pulled Ethan after her into an Escheresque dimension of concrete horizontals interrupted by support piers and prefabricated walls. In places floors and ceilings were incomplete; yawning voids opened and overlapped onto lower levels; above, the cold November sky, threatening rain. The unavoidable debris of Construction Man lay scattered about (“You should hear some of the propositions I’ve had”); his tools, his toys, his topless Page Three girls, his diet Coke cans.

Luka unhooked a wraparound VR audio-visualizer and paired datagloves from her belt and handed it to Ethan Ring.

“Watch and learn, lover.”

The lift into altered perception was terrifying and thrilling.

Planes and shafts of stabbing color, curves, angles, all connected by rushing lines of force, of velocity. The sense of *speed* as he moved across the concrete floor sent him reeling. Air compressors, welding equipment, power tools, portable generators, became vibrant vortices of movement. He could see the energy they contained as a rush of images, time dependent action compressed into static timelessness. A discarded bottle opened up

into spirals and planes of stored power; a crumpled newspaper became a whirling concatenation of information and vertigo.

“What is this?” he begged, seeking stability, seeking Luka, seeing a blur of kinesis.

“The Boccioni-verse.” Her voice was a deep, sure root in the hurtling instability. “Umberto Boccioni; doyenne of the Italian Futurist painters, 1882—1916; obsessed with industry, energy, velocity, and aggression. This place is perfect for him. ‘The City Rises’! Can’t you just smell the testosterone? Would have made a great fascist if he hadn’t fallen on his head while out riding one morning in Verona and prematurely terminated himself.”

The slightest movement of his head sent lines of colored energy rushing past him.

“How do you do this?”

“With computers. Isn’t everything? I remixed an old video image-processing system using retailored commercial enzyme programs to hack it apart and reassemble it.” Shedding planes of hand-shaped light, she picked up a fiber-optic cable, burning, writhing with visible information. “Head-mounted cameras pick up images, the mobile here processes them and feeds them back to the YRs. This one’s visual-only mode. Later I may add extra dimensions. Next, I’m thinking, maybe a Cubist-verse, or even Kandinsky. Miro, perhaps? You fancy me as a squiggly black thing with a little blobby head? Eventually, I want to create my own discrete, personal universes. Luka-verses like no one’s ever seen before. Found sources. Junk aesthetics. Reality overdubs.

“They can’t see it, Ethan. The others in my class. Because I want to use software remixing to mold reality/virtuality overlays, I’m a fascist. Mechanistic, soulless, irrelevant to the Zeitgeist of twenty-first-century man trapped in a universe of quantum indeterminacy, they say. But at least I care. I love what I do, I love why I do it; I’m not tapping my forehead three times in the shit to Ideology-of-the-Month. They care about their P.C. credibility, or being talked about by the right set, or mentioned by the right tutors, or if they’re tutors themselves, at the right parties, fuck integrity, fuck originality, fuck *art*. I care, Eth. I care like fuck, and I want someone to know it.” Her voice, speaking from the heart of a whirlwind of cascading

images, held a dark, tightly focused savagery Ethan Ring found disturbing and exciting for the same reasons.

Mechanistic soulless irrelevancies to the Zeitgeist notwithstanding, she received a Distinction for the Boccioni-verse project and persuaded Ethan to throw a celebration party in his flat.

“What’s wrong with yours?” he asked.

“Ah!” was her only answer.

Everyone from his and her classes who was not too small-spirited to accept turned up. They danced badly to far too loud music. They drank far too much. They smoked atrocious things and popped worse. They behaved abominably in public at antisocial hours, reeling up and down the street on each other’s shoulders, falling on cars, denting bodywork, setting off a Stockhausen symphony of security alarms. All night he watched her moving around his flat talking, laughing, drinking, grinning, looking beautiful and brilliant in a head-turning rubber dress, surrounded by brilliant beautiful drinking laughing talking people as irresistibly drawn to her as he in a cordon he could not penetrate for one word, one laugh, one dance for himself. Returning from the bathroom—so full of dope smoke it disconnected its many visitors from reality as effectively as any of Luka’s virtuality overdubs—he met her in her breathtaking rubber dress filling in clues on the World’s Longest Crossword that ran all the way around his living/sleeping room into the kitchenette space.

“Ethan.” Her fingers on his arm were *urgent* in a way he had never felt before. “Come on.” She pulled him away from the World’s Longest Crossword, away from the party, up the stairs to her flat. “Come *on*.” Into her bedroom. “Three parallel outbounds this evening. A crux, a crisis, a point of transition. This is the time.” She pulled him to her. She smelled of whiskey, warm rubber, and wild wild things. “Why do you think I had the party down in your place?” She locked the door. “Welcome to the Luka-verse.”

THE VOICE WAKES ME. For the second it takes the tap to download I cannot understand; then glass pyramids of language crystallize in my mind.

“Please, I’m so hungry, can’t I have something to eat?”

Dull gray light in the window; dawn light. She is so weak and frail she can hardly hold herself upright in the bed. The dull deathliness is gone from her eyes. There is a new light in her.

My ribs ache, the backs of my knees throb from having fallen asleep with my feet propped on the dressing table. Head like a loaf of stale bread, mouth like Satan’s rectum. Before I destroy the evidence of my dark art, I permit myself one brief glance.

Tiferet: Angel of Healing and Wholeness.

*Well-being* cascades through my *chakra* centers from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. Muscular aches and nags are wiped away. I feel I can run a marathon, outspring a greyhound, leap tall buildings in a single bound. I feel Olympian. I feel immortal.

“Please, mister, something to eat?”

I go out into the hall and call for Mrs. Morikawa. The house is awake within seconds. I gain the impression that no one has been asleep. While Mrs. Morikawa and family run about filled with joy, preparing miso soup, sloppy rice, tea, I wake Mas.

“The girl?”

“She’ll be all right now.”

He is still drunk with sleep.

“What... how?”

“Later. I promise.” What have I forced myself into? What lies, what deceptions, what mistrusts and hurts? A spiritual searcher would pray Lord Daishi for grace to save him from the consequences of doing right, but I am only doubting, profane Ethan Ring. “We should get going if we want to be on the far side of Tokushima City by nightfall.”

“It’s twenty past five in the morning.”

“I know.”

I want to be on the henro path and over the next mountain before the Morikawas, after rejoicing, remember us, and want to thank us, praise us, give us things. Ask us questions. Bikes are ready, packs prepared in half an

hour. With the light coming up all around us, pouring into the valley, flooding over us, we climb up through the bamboo and cane groves toward the henro way, me leading, Mas close up on my rear wheel.

From the high farming country we dip down again onto the densely populated coastal plains. Many temples here, much traffic inbound for Tokushima. No place for the uninterrupted cultivation of memory. The way demands total concentration. Tokushima City, the prefectural capital, is noisy, dirty, nasty; straining to the point of collapse under the weight of migrants from the failed offshore colonies and the social chaos of the Tokyo Bay conurbation. Tokushima is—always has been—a barrier gate city. In historical times, the borders between provinces were tightly policed, and barriers established to check on the authorization and travel permits of traders and visitors. Henro were barely tolerated, suspected of being spies, assassins, Imperial agents, or other undesirables. Alongside the political barriers existed a second kind of barrier gate: temple barriers, places of spiritual examination and testing, where the pilgrim who was able to worship freely and purely might continue, but if misfortune was encountered, or ill omen, he must return and begin his pilgrimage again.

The political barriers may have fallen, but the spiritual gates still stand. The henro path takes us away from Tokushima City's thronged main thoroughfares, through back streets and industrial districts where the now-permanent recession that has struck down Japan is everywhere visible, the closed-up shops, the shut-down small factories. Mass-produced accommodation pods stacked ten, twenty high pen us in, direct us into a labyrinth of lanes and alleys. Emergency housing; the estate of the new dispossessed. Mas is visibly uneasy; even I can sense the angry desperation, one freakish alien among two hundred million; more, I am of that people that challenged and defeated their empire and condemned them to the estate of refugees in their own country. Children in This Year's Model sportsgear watch with a disturbingly adult intensity from the scramble nets and bamboo ladders that access the higher levels; men squat at intersections around boomboxes, play handball against graffiti-stained walls, hang about, hang out, wait; women are the salarypersons here, casual part-time workers in labor-intensive service industries. Only the biopowered robots have jobs for life with the compassionate the caring the Company. Smells of shit, charcoal, street food, engine oil, hot dust, and the undefinably familiar

sweet scent of home-brew E-Base. Sounds of twenty satellite channels playing at once; in every stall, every bar, every shop, every home, robot-manufactured flatscreen Sonys play all day, play all night. Life during prime-time. Disemboweled vehicles. Shot-down streetlights. Abandoned shopping trolleys. Graffiti aspiring to be Art, and Noticed. Dogs—fighting dogs.

For some people it is the hairs on the back of the neck. For others, the pricking of the thumbs. For me, it has always been a tingle at the base of my spine; that unmistakable prescience of *trouble*. Eight of them, in light camouflage armor set to Chapter heraldics, enfolded by the elaborate streamlines of techno-gothic Yamahas. Akiras: middle-class kids seduced away from teleburbia's low-key pleasures by fifteen channels of samurai-*anime* cut with the Guitarz'n'Blood ethos of Trash Metal, fleeing from a mythologized Imperial past, questing for an unattainable future. The big Yams circle us; engines growl, gobbling hydrocarbons. On the pillion seats, girls with fluttering standards fixed to the backs of their jackets analyze us with scanshades, intimidate us with black lip gloss. A word from the leader—a fat, dangerous youth who has solved a terminal greasy hair problem by knotting it into a queue—and they hustle us into dark and stinking ratrun between overlapping levels of housing pods. His blackseat girl plays with my red hair, twines it around her black leather fingers, sucks it between her wet black lips. Mas, an uncharacteristic tone of panic creeping into his voice, bows constantly, spastically, repeating that we are only pilgrims following in the footsteps of the Daishi, two innocent pilgrims. Fat Boy would rather stare at the impudent red-haired *gaijin*. His hand strokes to my neck; I flinch away. A silent flash lights up the inside of my skull, a numb dumbness; my language tap has been ripped out of its socket. He tosses it end for end, catches it in his gloved hand. Mas's pleadings now verge on breaking down completely, and the words have been literally taken out of my mouth. Fat Boy is irritated. With people like these, irritated is dead. I have seen it, I know. And I know that I must act, though the henro in me screams at the thought of releasing the demons... I shout to Mas in English: *Close your eyes. Now. Do as I say!* and reach to peel the glove off my right hand. A steel whisper: the girl whips a short *tachi* from a sheathe on her thigh, presses the tip to my Adam's apple. I raised my hands, gloved. Head



cocked gaminely to one side, she is smiling. Fat Boy is smiling. His friends are smiling.

If irritated is dead, smiling is gutted. Smiling is head on a jacket-back pennant-stay. A shout. Fat Boy's deputy has found something in Mas's bags. The commander clicks his fingers *show me*. It is one of Masahiko's Danjuro 19: *Kabukiman!* henro slips! Fat Boy holds it up before Mas's face, raps questions. Even without my tap, their context is clear from Fat Boy's intonation and Mas's terrified, nodded answers. Then with the same terrifying speed with which it was drawn, the sword is resheathed. Fat Boy bows, returns me my tap, bows to Mas, and offers him the henro slip deferentially, with both hands.

"Kabukiman? You make Kabukiman?" He turns to his gang and shouts theatrically. "He! Invented! Danjuro 19!" His platoon murmur and bow, genuinely awed. "The Setting Sons Chapter owes you a big apology, both of you," says Fat Boy. The transformation is so swift and staggering I still cannot believe it. "We've treated men on spiritual business dishonorably. Tosa Securities is expanding into Tokushima Holdings territory; they're trying to win policyholders over by looking strong against the brothers. Tokushima Holdings is fighting back and the street is in the middle. The Black Dragon Chapter was wiped out last month; you can't trust anyone anymore. They've got agents everywhere. Can you forgive us? At least let us escort you to the next temple; we'd be proud to do that for the creator of Kabukiman."

We can hardly refuse. Pennants fluttering and tugging, wing mirrors glinting, the akiras mount up and form vanguard and rearguard around us. The sound of the Yamahas reverberates from the housing stacks and the recession-struck, shuttered-up businesses. On the faces of the people that we pass I see who are the back-street heroes, the Young Soul Rebels, the Robin Hoods to the big Police Corporations' Sheriffs of Nottingham and Guy of Gisbornes. Fat Boy, riding close beside, tells me that, to them, Kabukiman is the spirit of true Japan, epitome of honor, justice, respect, individuality, faithfulness, action, experience, and violence; the measure of a real man. "He knows how to live," Fat Boy says. His girlfriend reaches out to touch my hair, run it over her black glossy fingers.

"Hey, mister with the fabulous hair, Danjuro 19 was always the friend of the true akiras," she says.

At Temple Eighteen we make our ablutions and devotions and have our albums inscribed while the akiras lounge about on their bikes outside the temple gate, smoking. The priest wants to call Tosa Securities, I dissuade him. Fat Boy accepts the Kabukiman henro slip with tears in his eyes and gives us each a pack of Black Cats as settai. Later, I say, when the pilgrimage is over and we can enjoy such things, we will smoke them and think fondly of Tokushima and the Setting Sons Chapter.

As they drive away, pennants rippling, Mas quietly throws up into the neatly mown grass by the temple gate. When I go to help him, offer paper tissues, water from the bottle on my bike, he waves me away, angry, afraid. For the rest of the day's ride to Temple Nineteen he will not speak to me. The incident with the akiras has affected him out of all proportion to the cause. For my part I am content with his silence; I have my own inner reaches to plumb: the seduction of power, the narrowness of my escape, a grace—the Daishi, walking with me?—that has so far permitted only the selfless use of my power while preventing the selfish, the harmful. But even selflessness is failure: I have crossed half the planet to come on this pilgrimage to break that power absolutely. The sky is crisscrossed with the contrails of many aircraft—local aerospace forces, weaving an intricate pattern of defense in the ionosphere I cannot decipher.

Our prayers in the Daishi Hall at Temple Nineteen are dry and lifeless; a computer (read secretarial) error at our hotel has assigned our room to a brace of interior designers over from Osaka for the week-long Shinto anniversary. It is the big annual download. The place is busier than Bethlehem in a census. If apologies were roof tiles we would sleep warm and dry but as they are not, we find shelter in a truckers' coffin hotel on the faded side of town. "No tattoos" says the sign behind the reception desk.

"No room at the inn," I joke but the girl on the desk doesn't have the referential baggage and Mas still isn't speaking. I am reluctant to leave the demon box in a locker in the communal changing room but the other guests in their uniform blue checkered kimonos and tabi are already politely not staring and, after the akiras, I am wary of provoking interest. The box on the third level—padded, air-conditioned, with integral videophone, radio, television, minibar (I raid the chocolate, pass, ruefully, on the Scotch), and service call button—is pleasingly womblike, if not exactly designed with people of my height in mind. I remember a bullshitting Beefeater once

showing me the cell in the Tower of London called “Little Ease” that was too short, too narrow, too low to allow its occupant to stand or lie straight. Torture. I flick across television channels: sport, sport, chat show, sport, EmTeeVee, ads, ads, an old British sitcom that wasn’t funny when I first saw it fifteen years ago. No Danjuro 19: *Kabukiman!* I find *le porno* but the plotless, artless slomo-ing of rounded chunks of oiled anatomy to what sounds like the Japanese idea of Harlem elevator music is deeply depressing, utterly anti-erotic.

I surface from contorted fleshtone dreams—falling asleep with the television on—wakened but not knowing what has woken me. The big rack of sleep pods shakes to the thunder of passing trucks, plumbing gurgles, air-conditioning whirs like a gray moth. A cry—more a wail—a voice begging for them not to hurt her don’t hurt her please don’t hurt her. Mas’s voice, beyond the thin plastic wall.

Crouching on the mesh catwalk, I hammer on the coffin door until he opens. *I heard you cry out, is anything the matter, what’s wrong?*

Nothing is the matter, nothing is wrong, everything is fine just fine he says but I see that his face is stone, hard stone, the face of a man who has been my friend all my adult life. Betrayed, confused, frightened, I return to my dark coffin in a far foreign country, and seek the pale comfort of memories.

LUKA CONCEIVED THEM. LATER, when she saw their true faces she would disown them but her words, her speculations, were the seed; the ten parts per thousand piss-water of the Nineteenth House pool the amniotic fluid in which conception took place.

“Jesus Joseph and Mary, a pool!” was Luka’s first reaction on arriving with Masahiko, Marcus, and ’Becca to take up Ethan Ring’s offer of summer hospitality in the sun. Thereafter she spent a significant part of every day stroking up and down, up and down, up and down; clear, glossy water shedding across her back, the crest of hair slicked across her shaved scalp, her brown shoulders. “Bet you never guessed I had an Esther Williams fetish. Why couldn’t they have had kinships for men, and why couldn’t my dad been in one? I was a deprived child, sympathy sympathy.”

On the third morning that the thermometer stuck at ninety-eight, they all decided to follow Luka’s example, returned to the primeval semi-aquatic state, and congregated breast-deep in the deep end around a floating tin bath full of slushy ice studded with bottles of import beer. Immersed in cool water, their talk turned to ambitions, hopes, fears, art, ideas.

“I’ve an idea!” Luka shouted. Bottles were deftly uncapped on the tiled pool edge, bottle caps sashayed down through the green-tinted water to form improbable constellations on the bottom. “Wrap this in a Rizla and toke it. In every piece of art or architecture or design there is an essence, a visual element that bypasses conscious discrimination and stimulates a direct psychological—even physiological—effect. Something that precedes understanding, analysis, interpretation, appreciation; that hits straight home in some deep reptile part of the brain and fires it off. Like, say, patterns of color and shape that create an overpowering impression—even a feeling—of dread, without there being any image you could specifically identify as *dreadful*.”

“Like emotional response?” asked ’Becca, floating on her back with a bottle of Becks balanced between her breasts.

“More powerful than that. More primal. Pre-emotional. Chemical.”

“I’m only a mere designer, but isn’t the whole point of abstract art to stimulate this kind of response?” asked Marcus.

“It strikes me that this effect can only be found in abstract art.” This from Masahiko, pressing a fresh-from-the-bath beer bottle to his forehead. “Ecstasy. In representational art, or design, the strength of the image itself would drown out this... preconscious effect.”

Ethan considered the flags rattling from the mastheads of the sleek white cruisers down in the marina before speaking.

“Not necessarily. Not at all. Like I once read this book.” Hoots of derision. Ethan persevered. “Like I said, I once read this book about typography, by this really famous designer from back in the eighties, nineties: Neville Brody. Neville Brody?” Shrugs. “Barbarians. Well, there’s a bit I remember where he talks about a typeface being ‘authoritarian.’ At the time I thought, *What is this shit, how can letters on a page convey authority?* But he was right; it’s exactly the same thing you’re talking about, Loo.”

“Call me that once more, Ethan Ring, and you’re catfood.”

“That the form of the letters in which a message is printed can somehow embed a subliminal meta-text?” asked Masahiko.

“I wouldn’t have put it quite like that, but yes.”

“You mean, like printing political pamphlets in heavy, dark sans serif type can make the reader subconsciously more susceptible to the message than if it were in an italic or script font?” Becca suggested.

“Conversely,” said Luka brightly, “you could set the Koran in one of those ghastly 1970s fonts made up from Art Nouveau women’s faces as an act of graphic subversion.”

“To get back to Luka’s original idea,” Ethan Ring said, “does there exist, is it possible to construct, the ultimate authoritarian typeface? One in which the embedded subconscious message is so powerful that the reader has to obey whatever is written in it?”

“To hear is to obey,” Marcus said.

“To see is to obey,” Luka corrected. “Shut up, you guys, Ethan has something here.” He was wagging a finger at unseen choirs of Muses, sucking in his lower lip, and gazing at the bottom right quadrant of heaven as he did when the creative saps were flowing in him.

“Are there, in fact, whole families of these things, out there, in there, somewhere; pure refined forms of what we have been talking about. Visual”—he caught at words—“entities that the conscious mind can’t

process, that slip past our powers of rationality and discrimination and stimulate direct, physical responses. Like joy, or anger, or religious ecstasy, like getting high. Or even entirely new altered states of consciousness.”

“Buddhist mandalas are supposed to open the mind to nirvana,” Masahiko threw in. “Perhaps mandalas, abstract art, different styles of typography, all contain hints, diluted forms of these things Eth’s talking about. The true visual entities, the pure forms, the absolute forms, await to be seen, synthesized, isolated.”

“ ‘Lost Acres,’ ” Becca said. “An old poem by Robert Graves, I think. Didn’t they teach you anything at school?”

“Wanking mostly,” said Marcus. “And how to roll joints one-handed.”

“Shows. ‘Lost Acres’ is about how small parts of the landscape disappeared due to surveying errors. I’m not exactly sure how, but bits of fields, lanes, hedgerows, woods, got folded up and never appeared on the maps. On the map, A-ville will be right next to B-town; on the ground, there could be entire geographies in between.”

“Hidden realities. Bit Swords’n’Sorcery for me,” Marcus said.

“Like these entities may be the lost acres of the mind, things that have been overlooked by the higher consciousness; that it can’t see them, can’t process them, fills in the space where they are by folding up the visual map around them, putting things on either side next to each other, like the blind spot in the eye.” Becca again.

“Perhaps they all exist in the blind spot,” Masahiko said. “Perhaps that’s what the blind spot is, the part of the eye that registers these visual entities the mind can’t see.”

“Like the way the natural world embeds complex chaotic forms, like fractals, or the Mandelbrot set, that we find difficult to process,” Ethan said.

“Maybe consciousness is nothing more than a filtering mechanism so that we can go about our daily lives without being blinded by the constant light of God,” Luka said.

“Hey hey hey hey,” Marcus interrupted. “This is getting the teeniest bit scary, boys and girls.”

That night the marina burned. All the Nineteenth House and its neighbors in the unit turned out to watch the blaze and pass around cocktails and binoculars.

“Pure fucking apocalypse, the biggest burn since the Spanish Armada and I can’t find my fucking palmcorder!” Luka screamed in frustration. Someone was wheeling out a barbecue. Up on the road behind the Nineteenth House, the car headlights were nose to tail.

“What we were saying this afternoon,” Marcus confided to Ethan. “I think I know how it could be done. Expert systems sift images, locate those areas that embed this nonconscious stimulus thing, stack them to isolate common factors, and image-processing software amplifies and enhances them.” Ethan was less than half listening to Marcus’s evangelism, hot dogs and curled-up burgers were going round; Nikki Ring had brought out a beatbox. The flames were now throwing themselves thirty to forty meters into the hot summer night. A gasp from the assembled spectators: a gas cylinder had gone up with a scream and starburst like a rocket. Not even the Coronation fireworks had been this good.

“They reckon it’s terrorists,” said Masahiko, accepting something vaguely vodka-ey/orangey from one of Ethan’s co-sisters. “Islamic, Zionist, Third-World Debt-defaultist, Basque, Irish.”

’Becca appeared on the terrazzo with the palmcorder that she had found under a pile of Luka’s dirty underwear. Luka kissed her flamboyantly and with a rebel yell was over the fence, down on the beach, and running toward the conflagration, viewfinder pressed to eye.

“You are one lucky lucky bastard, Ethan Ring,” said Masahiko and for the first time Ethan Ring knew and understood and appreciated and valued what he had with Luka. He wanted then to just stand and look at her, flamelit, videoing thirteen million ecus of burning yacht but Marcus was a persistent whisper in his ear.

“Think about it, Eth. Think what you could get for a graphic image that does everything E-Base does with no side effects no addiction problem no accidental overdose; think what they would pay for a typeface that makes you obey whatever is written in it.”

“Marcus, it was a joke. A joke, that’s all.”

“Many a true word spoken in jest, Eth.”

IT WAS BEAUTIFUL. IT looked like... It looked like... Like...

“There’s nothing there,” said Ethan Ring. The thing slipped from his field of vision like a glass eel. “I don’t see anything.”

New term in the rainy-day city. Same faces, same places, moved up a year, October outside the computer suite windows. Masahiko had logged off tonight’s installment of *Kinjiru* Cyber Les-girls. The last technician had issued the ritual admonition to switch off the lights *and nothing else* and left the room of humming monitors to the three pioneers, and the thing Marcus had found.

“You can’t see anything,” said Luka Casipriadin.

“Luka’s right,” said Marcus Cranitch. “It’s the blind spot effect we talked about. It’s there all right.” Qwerty icons were summoned. “If I enlarge the image by a factor of ten...”

The visual nothingness opened like a lotus blooming and engulfed them.

It was awe and it was wonder. It was beauty and it was terror. It was purity and it was judgment. It was everything and nothing, void and light, annihilation and creation. Alpha and Omega. The Primal *Fiat*. The Great I Am. It was love and truth and justice and holiness and might, everything every book, every verse, every mantra, every sutra, said it was. It was every spiritual experience, every dervish dance, every glimmer of nirvana, every shaman trance, every elevation into rapture. It was more. Vastly more.

It was the face of God. The room shook. The computer suite was filled with the sound of a rushing mighty wind. Tongues of fire seemed to dance on the heads and hands of the trinity of observers, their lips moved with ecstatic utterances in languages never before heard on the tongues of humans.

After a time that seemed like a foretaste of eternity, Luka’s voice was heard. “ ‘My face you shall not see, for no man may see my face and live.’ ” Her words seemed to come through a cavernous white roar, as of angels’ wings beating before the throne of God. “But we see, we fucking see, and live!”

Every word of Marcus’s was a boulder of rationality pushed up the asymptotic incline of ecstasy.



“I accessed the National Gallery’s datacore for religious art and icons and set the program parameters to flag me every time it came on something that corresponded to my definition of the spiritual, the numinous, the irrational. Have you any idea how many Madonna and Childs I had to look at before I got a big enough sample? It took the machine three days to collate and render the samples I stored, another overnight fifteen-hour run to enhance the image.”

“And what came out in the end is something that stimulates the human facility for religious ecstasy,” Ethan said, his words slipping, sliding into the light-filled voice of God.

“You got it. All those icons, all those mandalas and Sanskrit mantras and illuminated Celtic manuscripts, they’re just reflections, hints, memories, explorations. This is the true glory.”

And the transfiguration was gone. The glory lifted. God’s face turned away. Only painful afterimages remained and a piercing sense of Paradise Lost. Luka’s hand moved from the off switch.

“We aren’t supposed to see these things. God hides his face for a reason. Humankind cannot bear too much divinity.”

“Secrets too terrible for Mankind to know?” Marcus’s scorn flayed. “Old sci-fi hokum. This is just the start. If there’s one, there’ve got to be others. And I’m going to find them.”

Luka shook her head.

“Dump it, Marcus. Erase it, smash it, get rid of it. It’s dangerous. It’ll burn you. It’ll destroy you. I promise.”

SHINGON AND THE ART of Mountain Bike Maintenance. I am up before dawn. It is a good time, the new hours, the fresh hours; the best time. Things are clearer. The air is crisp, cold, clean, the sky a prefaded shrink-fit denim blue deepening over the zenith to fresh, prewash indigo. The moon has been down for an hour. I sit on the curb dwarfed by the monolithic masses of trucks pulled in for the night at the coffin hotel, working patiently, steadily. When your safety depends on diligence, you do not rush your repairs. There is much value in tinkering with bicycles. As much as in riding bicycles, there is a state one enters where *I* and *you* cease to matter, where subject and object are abolished, where you and it become one thing, one unity, one awareness. True cyborg: man/machine fusion.

As I thought, the seatings for the thumb-shifts have worked loose. I tighten them with a small screwdriver from my toolkit, lubricate with a squirt or two of oil from the aerosol spray I carry in my belt pouch, and the sun comes over the roof tiles of Temple Nineteen on its hillside.

A hand touches my shoulder.

Mas. Bike ready. Bags packed. Kitted up.

“Just fixing the index system,” I say. “It kept slipping out of gear yesterday.” He nods, slides his wraparound shades beneath the dome of his henro hat and we are off, running down through the streets with the town waking up around us. Shops roll up their steel shutters; children hurry to school, multicolored backpacks swaying; delivery vans hum and purr through streets decorated with bunting and lanterns and banners for the Shinto festival. I share their sense of jubilee; of being on holiday, with one’s own agendas and destinations while elsewhere the world grinds on in the mundanities of work/eat/TV/sleep/work/eat/TV/sleep.

This stretch of henro path, from Temple Nineteen to Temple Twenty-three, is dense with connections to the life of the Daishi. The next valley over from Twenty contains the temple’s inmost sanctuary, a deep cave at the head of a narrow canyon where the saint meditated. Perhaps next pilgrimage. At Temple Twenty-one, atop Mount Tairyu—we must leave the bikes, and scramble up on foot—the Daishi attempted to invoke his guardian deity, Kokuzo, in a month-long ritual. No priest now—none are prepared to make the daily climb—but the diskperson guides from the

yencard dispenser relish in the esoteric detail of the Daishi's ritual: chanting the Mantra of Light one million times, painting the moon on a pure white sheet, and on the moon an image of Kokuzo, and on the image of Kokuzo a crown, and on the crown forty Buddhas, and in the palm of each Buddha an open lotus, and in each lotus a pearl emitting yellow rays...

"And so ad infinitum," I comment.

It was not on the mountaintop that Kobo Daishi attained enlightenment, but in a sea cave at the eastern tip of the Muroto peninsula. And it is toward Cape Muroto, toward the sea, that we journey through whispering groves of bamboo—always, to me, a deeply spiritual sound, the voice of the Buddha of the valley. I can smell the ocean now beyond the hills where Temple Twenty-two lies hidden like a pearl in a lotus. As ever, it fills me with its divine discontent. Sea changes. Mas has not spoken to me, but I sense that his spiritual tide is on the turn. Our silence is the silence of two friends who do not need words to express their closeness. We have passed the barrier gate.

The henro path from Twenty-two to Twenty-three has been overlain with blacktop and is now the pawing ground of monstrous, fast-moving juggernauts. Our maps mark an alternative coastal route: a good-riding switchback of a path with sheer forested hills on one side and the serene blue Pacific on the other. Nirvana between the mountains and the sea. We cross a rocky headland and before us is a curving beach of white sand. At the end of it, the town of Hiyasa and the many-colored steeple of Temple Twenty-three's pagoda.

I yell to Mas; he is as willing as I to pause awhile in this beautiful place. The water is cold; almost a physical shock. Air says late May, ocean says early March. I yell and flap and flubber enough to convince my long-cherished ambition to swim in every major ocean, then come running out, flicking long ropes of droplets from my hair. Mas waits beneath the outstretched branch of an ancient pine, like a blessing hand, drawing with light, fluid strokes of a brush pen. Turtles.

It's good to see him drawing again.

"Every spring, about this time, they come to lay their eggs," he says. "Every year, for millions of years, something calls them back to this beach to lay their eggs by the full moon. Long before we were, they came; long

after we are gone, all of us, and all our plans and ambitions, they will return still.

“I take great reassurance from that.”

He signs and dates the drawing in his sketchbook, titles it *Turtle Beach, Temple Twenty-three, Moon’s Third Quarter: Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo*.

After a time, Masahiko speaks again.

“I remember, years ago, we talked. That summer we all came down to your place, we talked about graphic entities that stimulated direct physical responses. A typeface that embedded subconscious images so that the reader would find it impossible to resist what the message said.”

“I remember that conversation.”

“You did it, didn’t you?”

My gloved fists clench instinctively. To relax them takes a mighty effort of will.

“Tell me, Ethan.”

“Yes. We did. Yes.”

“The Morikawa girl.”

“Healing is one of them. Laughter too. Tears. Ecstasy. Fear. Pain. Many many more. We named them after angels, the Sefirahs, but they deceived us.”

Mas laughs, bitter and theatrical; a kabuki laugh. “All this time, and I never knew I was traveling in the company of Danjuro 19 himself.”

“I’m no superhero, Mas. There are no superheroes, there is no James Bond; life isn’t *anime*.”

“Those akiras.” The word is like vomit to him. “You could have—I don’t know—frightened them, blinded them.” An unsuspected tight, clenched anger in Mas explodes. “Burned out their fucking brains.”

“I didn’t need to. You heard them say Kabukiman was always the friend of true akiras. They thought you were God.”

“I didn’t ask them to be Kabukiman freaks. I didn’t ask to be God; I didn’t ask for their adulation and hero worship and telling me how Danjuro stands for everything that is holy to them when everything they stand for, everything they are, makes me sick; sick, Ethan, like cancer in my stomach, and angry, and afraid; sick, angry, and afraid.” He is silent, tight, clenched

within himself so long I think he has nothing more to say. It is only the pause for a deeper pain to percolate through the sands of the spirit.

“We were going to get married. She was a PR manager for my Tokyo distributors. I met her at the Free Queensland *Kabukiman!* launch. I loved her. Like that.” Five fingers snap, like a trap closing. “It can happen.” I know. “More often than people think.” I know that too, Masahiko.

Out on the ocean, million-ton ore carriers are moving ponderously between probabilities of tropical storms. Beyond them, a low dark smear is an offshore arcology burning, staining the horizon with oily smoke. Down the beach toward the town, two kids are throwing sticks for a woolly dog.

“She moved in with me after three days. She was like that, she would do things because she felt like doing them. She had this bobtail cat: a *mi-ke*, the rarest kind, blind in one eye. It would sit in the window and look down at the street. Sometimes it would bat at the people it saw moving down there. It thought they were insects. Didn’t have 3-D vision, you see. I had to work a lot at night—got into bad ways at art college, you remember, when I had to steal computer time to work on *Kinjiru* Cyber Les-girls, that’s where *Kabukiman* started, Danjuro had a walk-on part. She would bring me endless cups of coffee. She made the only perfect coffee. She measured it, you see. Funny; the big things fade, her face, her body; it’s the small things that remain; cats, coffee. She used to play volleyball up on the roof, in those tight, cute shorts they wear, and kneeguards and elbow pads. Kneeguards, elbow pads, and shorts, they remain floating in space. I can’t see her anymore. Isn’t that strange? I loved to watch her running, jumping, shouting, totally unself-conscious. She was beautiful, I loved her.

“They killed her.”

An aged aged couple comes poking along the tideline with sticks, turning over wrack, driftwood, looking for treasures floated from mythic California. An aircraft makes a long, slow left turn, beginning its descent toward the Tokyo Bay hypurbation.

“That stupid car. It was one of the first of the new model Daihatsu 4x4s, when the biomotors were being introduced and it was a real status symbol to have one. She could be very stupid that way, about things like status. Very vain, sometimes. ‘Give it up,’ I told her. ‘It’s only a damn car, let the akiras have it.’ She sat there with both hands on the wheel with that piss-on-you look I knew so well, the one she’d turn on me when I did

something she didn't approve of, and everyone was shouting, all there was shouting and the sound of police sirens approaching and she said to me, 'Get in we're going' and—you know the way it happens in films when it all goes slow motion and you think reality is nothing like that, but it's true—it was like I saw it all in slow motion: the Boss taking one step back to get a clear shot, the way the machine-pistol jerked in his hand as he emptied the magazine into her, the way it opened her up, like a fish—can you believe it, that was what I thought, like a fileted bonito, the sound the last cartridge case made as it hit the concrete, the blare of the horn as she fell against it and how suddenly it stopped when they pulled her onto the street, how much blood there was, an amazing amount of blood, I didn't think there could be so much blood in one body... Funny, isn't it? The one thing I can't remember is the sound of the firing. They took the car. Incredible, she was still alive when the ambulance came. She didn't make it to the hospital. They got the akiras, you know. Chiba Security put the heads on display at the main district shrine.

"She was beautiful. I loved her. They killed her. Ethan, what is happening to my country? What's gone wrong?"

He cries unashamedly. Cold and wet, I fold him in my arms, offer him comfort. The aged aged couple pass by and murmur fondly to each other, misunderstanding. The tide advances up the beach. The big ships vanish one by one below the horizon. The edge of night approaches low across the ocean. Growing chill, I pull on shirt, zip-up jacket, track bottoms. I think about the turtles moving out there under many, many fathoms of water. I think about the burning arcologies.

MALKHUT: WHO SEES THE face of angels, *obeys*.

Yesod: Empire of the senses, domain of limitless pleasure.

Hod: glory: full frontal God.

Nezah: pain: emotional anguish, spiritual torment, physical agony, existential angst.

Tiferet: healing and wholeness.

Gevurah: terror. Pure. Raw. Absolute. Terror.

Hesed: arousal to orgasm in under three seconds.

Binah: the fracter that annihilates the sense of time the creator of order.

Hokhmah: forgetting. Utterly, instantly, irrevocably.

It was as if that one glimpse of the face of God had set in motion a wave of crystallization that precipitated entire choirs and chapters of visual entities. Every night, at the Hour of Harassed Cleaners, perceptual pioneers Cranitch and Ring would watch the un-images—*fracters*, Ethan Ring's coinage—unfold from their blind spots into things that sent them into paroxysms of laughter or hysterical weeping or plunged them into suicidal depression or took them to highs that the designers of the new mass-market synthetics could only hope for in wet dreams or left them paralyzed, immobile, dropped into stasis by a display that annihilated their sense of time until the fail-safe timer blanked the display and released them. Marcus, having digested The Illuminati during his teenage paranoia years, suggested naming them after the ten Sefirot of the Hebrew Cabala.

Luka now only visited the C.A.D. suite to issue warnings to Ethan. Marcus she must have thought beyond hope of salvation. Her visits to the sixth floor and the mayhem of Design Communications decreased correspondingly. She no longer came knocking on his downstairs door. It was months since she had slept with him, or stolen his shopping. Ethan stopped her on the stairs one Thursday evening in the hope that a confrontation might cause her to relent.

“Why? Close encounter between two Trans-Atlantics this morning?”

“A smart mouth isn't you, Eth. Okay. Why. You've been lucky so far, what happens one day you're gawking at the screen and up comes something that induces psychotic rage? Or total amnesia? How about schizophrenia, how about epilepsy, or suicidal depression, or worse? It

frightens me. There. That's it out in the open. Luka Casipriadin, that girl who isn't afraid of nothing? This scares her. Just because I got this natty Mohawk doesn't make me a cyberpunk ice-queen. This. Scares. Me. Fuckless. It scares me fuckless because I love you, Ethan Ring, and you're too fucking stupid to realize it."

Ethan reported the conversation, minus the last eighteen words verbatim.

"Worse," Marcus mused. Their experiments had now taken them into the realm of the Diabolicals, subfractors—now numbering over one hundred—evolved from permutation of the Sefirah program parameters. "Gives you that cold prickle right down in your balls, doesn't it, Eth? Like when you know you're going to get laid. She always could put her finger right on it. There is bigger game out there waiting for us. The biggest game. Epilepsy, amnesia, psychosis, sure. But sometime you got to put it all on the line for the big one. Live on the edge. Kiss the razor. Every explorer knows he's taking a risk. That's what we are, Eth; mental explorers, psychonauts, going deep in the darkest places of the mind."

"One hundred percent pure rockist macho bullshit," said Ethan Ring. "You'll be asking me to sniff your armpits next."

"You going to let Luka Casipriadin tell you what's game and what's not?"

Two fistfuls of black denim shirt. Face ten centimeters from face. The closest range of social interaction: lovemaking range, violent anger range. Taste-my-breath distance.

"You are within *this* of having your face pushed through that screen, Marcus Cranitch."

Illuminatus. Ethan Ring saw the unsuspected depths of anger within him, the fear he had made appear on Marcus's face, and was afraid. It was as if one of his mothers had sat him down and told him, quietly, fearfully, of some hitherto unmentioned congenital defect: schizophrenia, hemophilia, AIDS, lycanthropy. Ethan Ring, his life, his history, were a pretense, a robing and masking of the glass-hearted monster that was the true Ethan Ring. For an instant—brief but real—he had been filled with a hot, unclean excitement at the image of Marcus's face smashing the curved glass of the monitor into cubes and crumbs. He fled the computer suite. He fled the university and everything to do with it. He hid for three days behind his



artless posters and CDs and scraps of unsuccessful projects. Then he could no longer bear to look at the face of his anger and went to ask forgiveness. There was one light in the darkened, murmuring computer suite.

“Marcus.

“Marcus, I’m sorry. I just sometimes go kind of mad, you know?

“I’ve come to apologize, Marcus.

“Say something Marcus, don’t make me feel worse than I do now.

“Marcus? You okay?

“Marcus!”

The figure on the floor, lit blue by the light of the screen, lay supine, head tilted back, repeatedly slamming the rear of its skull against the cigarette-burned floor tiles. Arms and legs thrashed, the body convulsed epileptically. Tears of blood trickled from each eye, down the cheeks, onto the floor.

“Christ, Marcus!” Ethan Ring came around the desk to touch, to help, to do something, anything, *anything*. And the thing in the blue screen reached out and smashed him against the wall.

ONCE, WHEN ETHAN RING was a boy, he had given himself a severe electric shock playing with an old television.

Once Ethan Ring caught some mutant strain of influenza that sent his temperature to 103 and hallucinated he was climbing the concrete and glass face of an infinite office block, up and up and up and up and up.

Once, Nikki Ring's old Vauxhall Nova with Ethan-at-seven in the backseat had been sideswiped at a dark country crossing by something that did not stop and it had been spun three times around before Ethan Ring came to looking at a billboard proclaiming "All Have Sinned and Fallen Short of the Glory of God."

Once, Ethan Ring, walking merrily mellow back to his flat, had been set upon by two young white men in designer sportswear who headbutted him, kicked him in the small of the back, and relieved him of eighty ecus and a take-away curry.

The thing in the screen was all those. The thing in the screen was more. It was *shock*. Toxic karmic physical spiritual emotional culture techno socio cold turkey pure total utter: shock.

His heart skipped and misfired. His breath fluttered. His head screamed *migraine* at him. His hands, his arms, his legs, would not obey him but thrashed spastically. Urgent nausea pressed at the base of his gullet. He opened his eyes. The thing in the screen leapt out of his peripheral vision and slammed his brain against the inside of his skull. He waited forever hiding inside his skull until proprioception told him his body would now do what he told it. Eyes closed, he groped across the floor. He swore at his hands *stop shaking, stop fucking shaking*. His eyes flickered at the touch of soft, spasming flesh. No. No. Medusa's sister, basilisk's brother. To look upon their faces was to die. Fingers climbed the desk leg, crossed the desktop, found the *off* switch, and pushed it. Almost, he opened his eyes. Almost. Marcus could have printed out a hardcopy. Fingers felt their way to the printer, delved into its nooks and crevices. Nothing. He opened his eyes. The disk. The fracter disk. He ejected it from the drive. It burned his hand like an ingot of white iron. Taking the elevator to the front door was eternal torment.

“If you boys spent as much time on your projects as you did in the Union bar...” admonished the doorman, well used to student excess.

“An ambulance!” Ethan Ring screamed. “Call a fucking ambulance!”

The last of the ten Sefirot was enthroned.

Keter: the Void. *Annihilation*.

THERE IS TO BE a Fire Ceremony tonight at Temple Twenty-four. All are welcome, Priest Tsunoda tells us. He is a small, vigorous man of great charm and charisma; a retired cram-school teacher in Beloved Schoolmaster tradition of Bette Davis, Robert Donat, Robin Williams. The stories that roost around this isolated cluster of three Temples at the tip of the Muroto Peninsula whisper that he could have been a Nobel laureate in his chosen field of mathematics, but he renounced worldly fame and the praises of men to devote his life to what he called “subversion through education”: kebabing the Japanese sacred cow of exam-cram-4-job-4-life-in-the-Company on the thin, dangerous skewer of learning for learning’s sake. School governors, PTAs, local politicians, villified him. His students deified him. Bertrand Russell’s quotable: “How good it is to know things!” had been painted above his chalkboard. It followed him to Temple Twenty-four with only one change: the addition of the prefix “un” to the penultimate word of the motto.

“One third of your life to learn things, and the rest of it to unlearn all the rubbish they cram into you,” he says as he shows us to our neat, scrupulously clean room, scented with sandalwood, lavender, and the sea. “Quality: to know what is good, what is not good, and why: that was what I was trying to teach. If even a handful learned that, I can pass from this world content.”

Cape Muroto is a sixty-mile sharks-tooth hooked into the skin of the Western Pacific Basin. Its northern face is a forbidding scarp of sheer black cliff, its southern a grand sweep of sandy bays and headlands terminating in Cape Ashizuri two hundred kilometers to the south. *Enola Gay* used Moroto as a landmark en route from Tinian Island to her two minutes of fame over Hiroshima. To the henro, it marked in no uncertain terms the arrival of the hardships of Tosa Prefecture.

*Tosa is the Devil’s country,  
No hospitality there, you may be sure.*

complained a sixteenth-century henro. The names may have changed—it’s Kōchi Prefecture now—but the song remains the same.

We were ten kilometers out on the main road east out of Hiyasa—not a route we would have chosen but the rough coastal terrain made beach riding impossible—when we hit the checkpoint. We came on it unawares, blindsided by a line of trucks. Glimpsing uniforms and flashing blue lights between the walls of traffic, we imagined an RTA. Only at the head of the queue did we see our mistake. Two armored personnel carriers—ex-military—were parked across the highway; on their flanks, on the helmets and shoulders of the armored men checking the vehicles through one by one was a symbol of an eagle clutching crossed lightning bolts in its talons and the name: Tosa Securities Incorporated.

They were the ones who had caused Mr. Morikawa's death at Temple Twelve. We were entering the heart of their empire.

"Purging undesirable elements, they tell you," the driver of a pickup told us. He was transporting a load of young trees with their roots wrapped in wet sacking. "My ass. It's good old medieval transit tax."

A white-helmeted, white-gloved private policeman beckoned us forward, polite, but eternally a policeman. Our security transit passes—supposedly good for all the private forces on the pilgrimage route—henro albums, and my European passport were examined minutely, then taken for further examination by an unseen officer inside one of the troop transports. I found it a thoroughly disagreeable sensation, to have one's identity, one's right to move and be, taken away, to be so vulnerable. After ten minutes our papers were returned stamped with transit permits and thirty-day policy cover-notes for which we were required to part with thirty thousand yen each.

At least you could tell Long John Silver by the parrot on his shoulder. I could not rid myself of the impression that my documents had been digitally scanned. They smelled vaguely... electronic, like fresh photocopies, or faxes. Everything in order, the policeman welcomed us to Kōchi Prefecture, advised us to stick wherever possible to the signposted Approved Tourist Route as "Antisocial Elements" were still active and he could not guarantee that our policy would fully cover us if we wandered off the proper way. He politely bowed us through. Dodgy cover or not, we were seldom so glad to find an opportunity to turn off the Approved Tourist Route onto the old henro path.

The Way, through coastal towns, along fearsome cliff paths, was terrifying and thrilling. The eighty kilometer stretch between Twenty-three and Twenty-four—to us, only a strenuous day's ride—with few towns and less alms persuaded many to rethink their calling to the pilgrim life. One chronicler of the pilgrimage comments that Awa, the prefecture behind us, was famed for its perfection of the art of the ballad-drama. Tosa bred fighting dogs. On the coast road stand stone images of Jizo, protector of children, living gateway between worlds, rescuer of the perishing from the torments of hell. The images all look out to sea, watching over the souls of sailors, fishermen, and all who go down to the sea in ships. Hard land. Stern spirits.

Though it is late, and we are tired, Priest Tsunoda advises us to visit the sea caves while there is still light. Tucked between the roots of a subtropical banyan, the wave-cut caves are wide, low, dry, intricately intersecting with each other. This is the place where the Daishi at last achieved enlightenment as the morning star, the avatar of Kokuzo, rose out of Yakushi's Pure World in the East. Pilgrims have built cairns of flat sea-washed stones in commemoration of his achievement, as pilgrims will. The sound of the sea is oddly muted, the air moves in odd vortices through the interlinked caves, but try as I might I cannot find in myself any of that ancient spirit of ecstasy and tranquillity. All long since carried away with the flotsam on the flooding tide. The light is fading fast now, shadows fusing and melting into greater darknesses. I lift a stone to place it on a cairn. In the dark recesses of the grotto a shadow moves.

My right hand moves toward the cuff of my left glove.

"Sorry to have alarmed you, brother henro," a refined male voice says. There is a strange, arthropodal clicking. Something moves in the shadows, steps toward us on too many feet. Far too many feet. Half man, half... "Please, place your stone," the hemi-human says. "Permit me to introduce myself. Mr. Spider at your service."

As he clicks and hums his way over the rocks he tells us the story of his last two incarnations on his way to enlightenment. He first was as Kiyoshi Ueno, number one salesperson of the IkoIko Zipper Company; then came his head-to-head encounter one Tuesday night with a ghost-driver in the fast lane of the West Bay Elevated Sky Way. Closing velocity: two hundred kph; range: fifty meters; the ghost-driver chickened, lost it, and

flipped across three lanes inbound to fireball out among Korean guest-workers' allotments. IkoIko Zipper Salesperson of the Year impacted with the central crash barrier and was removed to the Chiba District Trauma Center sustaining multiple fractures to fifty percent of his skeleton. After four months immobilized in a steel frame, only his spinal cord in the region of vertebrae twelve and thirteen remained unrepaired and, his doctors gently convinced him, unrepairable. At some point in those four months fixed to the corners of the metal frame the life that was Kiyoshi Ueno died and, while the attention of the medical robots was turned elsewhere, was reborn as Mr. Spider.

The mobility unit fits around the waist and supports his body in a plastic cradle. Six biomotor legs carry him across the surface of the planet; strong, tireless, but to my unenlightened eyes disturbing: synthetic muscle hooked onto metal limbs by neuroplastic sinews. At his invitation we examine the synaptic interfacers drilled into the back of his neck, the rainbow swathes of datacore. He proudly points out the corporate ident stickers plastered over every available surface of his walker. Similar logos adorn his henro hat and robe. His stole is sponsored by the Sea of Tranquillity Holistic Drinks Company, his staff by Sony. His henro bell, made for him by one of the last Living Treasures, the irreplaceable master craftspersons of Japan, rings continuously as he moves with a deep, ocean-clear voice, oddly tranquil for such restlessness.

"The Daishi gave me back my gift of mobility so that I might use it not for myself, as I did when I was Kiyoshi Ueno, but for others," he says. Since leaving rehab he has raised money for just causes by the simple—for some—act of walking. The Tokaido first, then the pilgrimage of the thirty-three temples of Kannon that cross the spine of Honshu from sea to shining sea. After that climbing Mount Koya to the Shingon capital on its summit, and going straight on to complete the miniature circular pilgrimage of temples on Shodo Island in the Inland Sea. These, he says, were merely preparations for this his heart's desire, the great Shikoku pilgrimage. Twenty major companies are sponsoring him or have donated funds to enable him to make the trip; the number of individuals runs into the hundreds. A Tokyo media-news company are payrollling him for progress reports; he faxes them in as regularly as the humbler pace of a foot pilgrim

will permit. With the money he hopes to alleviate the suffering of children worldwide.

“We are the most terrible of species,” he says. “Only praying mantises hate and mistreat their offspring more.”

True holiness, I suppose, is like true humility. The one who claims to possess it is the furthest from it. Mr. Spider would be deeply shocked if he were told he was a true *hijiri*.

After dinner, Mas apologizes and slips out to make a lengthy 'phone call. Mr. Spider and I take tea and oranges and he tells me his pilgrim's tales. May he mention us in his next report? Priest Tsunoda has said he may use the temple fax. I would deem it an honor, I tell him, and it is not mere polite formalism. Time spent in the company of remarkable men is time well spent.

We go up to the Fire Ceremony, where we are joined by two others, young women, one of them heavily pregnant. We kneel, we five, before the central image of the Buddha, exquisitely crafted, as things must be in Shingon, the two young women, Mas, me, Mr. Spider, his metal legs folded beneath him like some cyborg centaur in repose.

One hundred and eight sticks of fragrant wood for the hundred and eight illusions of man.

Fire leaps in the stone basin on the altar, chases strange shadows from the recesses of the Daishi Hall.

The gong is struck. The bells rung. The mantras chanted. The prayers recited.

One by one, the hundred and eight sticks—the delusions of the material world, the hardships of the spiritual way, the sins of man's condition—are fed to the flames.

Doves rustle their rice-paper wings under the hammerbeams of the roof.

Fragrant leaves, incenses, oils, are cast upon the fire. Shadows move upon the priest's face, like uneaten sins driven from the lips and nostrils by the influx of penetrating light.

In all the world, there are only two sounds. The voice of Priest Tsunoda intoning the prayers. The heavy thump of the surf—more felt than heard—upon the rocks beneath Temple Twenty-three. At times those two sounds flow into one sound, one universal ocean-voice. The lanterns move



in the warm night wind, the shadows shift. And the sense of the numinous that had eluded me in the sea caves takes me up.

Of the time spent in that altered state of consciousness called divine ecstasy no one can speak for it transcends thought, self, language, logic. Any statement that may be made about it falls so far short of the truth of the experience as to be at best worthless, at worst misleading. Pure being. Well the medieval mystics named it the Cloud of Unknowing.

The flames gutter low. The chant ends. Beater strikes gong. The spirits are dispelled. Our sins, our weaknesses, our failures and false desires are burned to nothing. Priest Tsunoda indicates for us to draw near and rub the ashes onto whatever part of us is in need of grace. The second young woman rubs her pregnant friend's belly. The pregnant woman rubs ash onto her friend's lips, breasts, and loins. Mr. Spider rubs ash into his breast. "Keep my spirit pure, Lord Daishi," he whispers. "Keep my purposes holy." His bell whispers in reply. I lift the soft gray ash onto my fingers and rub a little carefully into the synthetic plastic palm of each hand. Mas watches me, takes ash from the firebowl, rubs it into his heart and his head.

MY WOODEN ROOM IS too full of the sound of the sea for sleep, the moon too bright, and I fear Mas's voice crying out beyond the shoji door in a sleep through which the akiras run with banners and blades in their fists, cutting long, slow-healing gashes along the folds of his brain. I fear it because there are things in my demon box that could end his nightmares, end them as if they had never been, and I fear them more. I fear the seduction of my power. Outside in the night the temple is still, dark, the air warm, troubled only the dim ionospheric rumble of aerospacers, the trans-horizon grumble of bulk carrier engines. I walk out along the cliff edge. The broken, moonlit ocean below is an almost sexual enticement. Heights have always held an unclean fascination for me, heights over dark water most of all. When I found Luka that time in San Francisco she had invited me to join her in a long-anticipated ambition to walk the Golden Gate Bridge. ("Not run, not jog, not power-walk, not street-hike, just per-am-bu-late, Eth.") We stopped where the sweeps of cable meet to watch the radio masts and satellite dishes of a Trans-Pacific freighter pass beneath (perhaps indeed the same one I hear tonight, out on the dark ocean) and I had confessed.

"Would it shock you if I said part of me wants to climb up on the rail and jump off?"

"Born with the moon in Cancer, under the sign of two transpolars," she had said. "Self-destruction shot through you like lightning."

How easy—how appealing—to fetch my bicycle and ride off into Kannon's Pure Land in the South. I can imagine the wheels leaving the neat turf of the cliff edge. I can imagine man and machine falling together; I can anticipate the skill that will be necessary to keep us one unity, manmachine. What I cannot imagine is the impact of the moonlit, wave-washed rock.

When the voice speaks, it is as if the Daishi himself has interrupted my thoughts.

"The wounded and the maimed, so?" Mr. Spider is night-silent on his arthropod legs. "Some places are naturally more conducive to it than others. Waterfalls. Lakes. Woodland clearings. Some gardens. High places, of course. Some places can move to suicide people who would never consider killing themselves ordinarily. Think much about it, son? Nothing to be ashamed of. I do. Every day. Every day, son. Look at me, son. Look at me,

what do you see? A brave man struggling against terrible disability? A hero? A saint? I'll tell you what I see. I see a travesty. A Tinkertoy man. An impotent, sterile thing kept in existence by the mercilessness of modern medicine. A man who is dead already. Dead already. Every time I look in the mirror, son, I look at death. Death in a bottle, death at the end of a rope, death under the wheels of a fast train, death at the foot of this cliff. I look, and I look, and death looks back and I see that there is something more ludicrous and disfigured and hideous and sterile and impotent than myself, and its name is death. By such small disclosures, we go on. We go on, son."

"You're a braver man than you admit, father."

"Or the greatest coward you are ever likely to meet, son."

"The greatest coward is the man who refuses to do good because of the hurt it may cause him, father. The man who fears to do good because it might cause evil."

"That depends if the man truly has power to do good, son, or is merely made impotent by guilt."

"This man has power to do good beyond your conception of power."

Mr. Spider raises his head, as if he knows the scent of a soul.

"And therefore evil."

"The reason he has come on this pilgrimage is to escape from great evil that lies in his past."

"Escape, son, may not be the way," says Mr. Spider. "It would be reassuring if everything was finally reducible to Light versus Darkness, Order versus Chaos, Good versus Evil. However, life is not pulp fantasy. If the Way were easy, what virtue would there be in following it? The teaching of the Daishi is that the Way does not lie in escape, or even in defeating. The answer to abuse is not disuse, but in the learning of right use, surely."

"I was afraid you would say that."

"So was I," says Mr. Spider.

"The Christians say all spiritual life is one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread," I say. Mr. Spider nods.

"The Daishi wrote a poem in this place," he says. He admits he has no reciting voice—it sounds like a cracked bamboo flute—but the words are strong in themselves.

*"Muroto:*

*Though day in, day out,  
Waves crash, winds roar,  
Yet, still,  
The voice of the Buddha is heard."*

"The Buddha of Medical Mercilessness?" I ask.

"The Buddha of the Chicken Gate?" He smiles. "I rode Space Mountain twenty-six times, in another incarnation, son." His six legs carry him carefully back along the cliff edge to the huddled dark geometries of the temple. "Sleep well, kid," he calls after me. After a time with the waves and the wind, I follow.

"Mas." I do not like to wake him from such a pure and untroubled sleep, but if I linger, my resolution will falter. "Mas." The moon is high behind me; silver light on a paper wall. I feel like a figure from poetry. "Mas."

"Ethan?"

"Healing. Laughter. Tears. Ecstasy. Fear. Pain. And forgetting. I didn't mention it, yesterday at Turtle Beach, the forgetting. I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of what you might ask me."

"To make me forget."

A subtropical moth has been trapped by the image of the moon on the shoji.

"It would be complete. It would be as if she had never existed. Is that what you want, for her to be gone from your life forever?"

"Ethan, she is gone from my life forever. I don't want to forget, I just want it to stop hurting. Can you do that?"

"There is no one fracter that can take away the hurt and leave the memory. I have one that can make you live it again, as if you were there in person; what you do with that chance to live it again is up to you."

"Ethan..." He grips my arm. His fingers are shapely, aesthetic.

"I'll go with you as far as I can. I have a fracter that will make sure it is never more than you can handle."

"Ethan, I can't go on the way I am."

"Then close your eyes," I tell Mas. "Don't look at me until I tell you."

The batteries in the demon box are low; two drops of syrup restore them to life. The fracters I require are low order; demons-minor, so familiar to me I have become almost immune to them: *La Serenissima* and *Mneme*. On the pine dressing table is a folded lacquered fan. I open it, peel the backings from the fracters' adhesive tabs. *La Serenissima* I place on the picture of quarreling magpies in the branches of a mountain pine; *Mneme* on the obverse, the file of happy smiling pilgrims wending down one mountain, up the next. I kneel before Masahiko, the fan open on my thighs, *La Serenissima* uppermost.

"Look now."

The breath goes out of him in a long, low sigh.

"What is it?"

"Marcus called it *La Serenissima*," I say. "Avatar of peace and tranquillity, serenity and calm. It stimulates the brain to produce endorphins, natural opiates." Mas nods slowly. His pupils are so widely dilated I imagine I can see the image of the moon contained there, whole, entire in each.

I turn the fan over in my lap.

"Mas," I say. "Remember the night she died."

Shadows cross his face, shadows from within. A movement of the moth on the paper wall, when I look back, every trace of the artificial peace of the Serenity fracter is wiped away. Only terror, helplessness, anger. Through the memory fracter, he is standing in that alley with the yellow streetlight gleaming from the polished plastic of the Daihatsu 4x4.

"Tell me, Mas."

"I'm standing shouting. I can't do anything but shout. What use is shouting? Why don't I do something? Why don't you do something? Why are you sitting there with that stupid, stupid, stupid look on your face?" It is not me he is shouting at; he cannot even see me, only the street, the night, *her*, "Don't you know that isn't going to do anything, anything but get you killed?"

"Go back," I order. "Back. How do you come to be in this street, at this time?"

A moment of *La Serenissima*.

"The basho. I forgot; it's the big sumo play-off tonight. The police have the stadium cordoned off, there are detours posted. The cars are tailed

way back for several blocks. Don't bounce your hands on the horn. 'Come on come on hurry up get a move on; look, it won't make it clear any faster. It'll clear in its own time. They'll still be around when we get there. You always were an impatient driver.'

"You are not to blame," I say for the first time. "It's all right to be angry with her. She wasn't perfect, nobody's perfect. Dying hasn't made her perfect. Dying doesn't make any of us perfect. The dead can be stupid. The dead can be arrogant and impatient. You are allowed to be angry with them. You are allowed to hate them."

Mas is trembling but I do not turn the fan *La Serenissima* face outward. Not yet.

"Go back," I say. He goes back.

"Hey! I remember a way around; not exactly a shortcut, more of a long-cut, but quicker than this. I grew up near here, I should know. Anything to get her to this party, though there are reports on the radio: trouble next zone over. The security forces are trying to close down some akira chapter. I never thought they would try to break out."

Memory to tranquillity. The harmonies and rhythms of the fracter touch my peripheral vision as an almost landscapelike serenity.

"Even if you suggested the detour; even if you heard the news and thought there might be danger, still, you are not to blame," I say. And it is the second time.

"Somebody has to be to blame."

"You?"

"Who else could it be, Ethan?"

"Her. She heard the radio reports too. She decided to take the detour. Why, Mas? Where was it she was so determined to get to? Why was she so impatient?"

*Mneme* now, and Mas's face is clawed by guilt.

"Why did you want to go to the party, why did I have to agree to go with you? It would be the same thing it always is, the same faces saying the same polite things, no one ever telling me what they really think, about me, about my work. Let's give it a miss, go see a movie, go out and eat, go shopping. 'There'll be People there,' you say. 'People, from Companies. They're always headhunting, that's what these parties are really for: headhunting expeditions.' There will be Sony-Virgin-Columbia PR daimyos

there with pockets full of contracts, and you'll be damned if you're going to miss out on them. You're always dreaming of this mythic, golden California. Well, maybe I don't have any ambition, maybe I'm content to be what I am, doing what I do. You get so angry when I don't do what you want. Well this time you aren't going to let my pathetic little shynesses and reclusivenesses stop you from going after what you want. Not this time."

"Would she have gone without you?"

"You're stalking up and down, up and down the hall in your party heels; it's so short you can only take three steps from end to end: click click click turn click click click turn..."

"Would she have gone without you?"

"Yes!" he shouted. "Yes. You would have gone. I asked you to wait five minutes while I got ready. Yes!"

"She would have gone to the party, taken the detour, ignored the warnings, run into the akiras, without you?"

"Yes," he says. "Yes. Yes!"

"You are not guilty," I say. "You are not to blame." I bring my right hand up before Mas's face. No glove. No spray-flesh. Naked. I open my fingers. "*Believe me.*"

Tattooed in the palm of my right hand is the image of Malkhut, that Sefirah fracter that whoever sees it, obeys.

"Believe me." Mas's pupils dilate as the quasi-fractal shatter of images slips up his optic nerves, around the curves and folds of his visual cortex, past all logic and rationality and consciousness, into the dark, preconscious fist of the medulla where sentience first sparked out of pure animal *being* three and a half million years ago.

"Believe me." What I tell you three times is true. True beyond any denial, true beyond any pain or guilt or fear or anything that might say no to it.

That time in Marrakech with Luka, we went down at nightfall to the Square of the Souls to watch a man push a thin metal skewer through his tongue from side to side while he danced and clicked his fingers and yelled praise to God. Each of those *believe mes* is like a thin, keen, leather-stropped skewer, driven through my lips, my tongue, the palm of each lying hand.

IN THE NIGHT THE wind backs into the east, driving up great waves that shake Temple Twenty-four to its bedrock. A fine carrying wind for bicycle pilgrims, swirling us along the old coast path up through Temple Twenty-five to Twenty-six, flapping our henro robes like akira war banners. The sea below us is whipped up into long, foam-flecked combers; the pathside pines toss and blow. It is like riding through a Hiroshige print.

A kilometer out from Twenty-five we sight the clicking arthropod shape of Mr. Spider whirring along the henro path, corporate sponsorship logos bold and bright in the morning light, stole flying, bell chiming. He greets us warmly. He has been on the road since dawn—observing our bikes and outlandish garb, he comments that foot henro must have a good start under them before the day is too old. I cannot tell him that there is now a compact of secrecy between Mas and I as deep and dark as the compact of self-destruction he and I made on the cliff-top because I trusted his truth that the answer to misuse was not disuse—destruction—but right use. Name slips are exchanged—Mas’s smartplastic gewgaw evokes a smile, but here we are first and last pilgrims meeting in a summer storm. He waves his staff as we pedal off up the path. *Dogyo Ninin*.

Rain had eroded the way into narrow, treacherous channels. My sudden braking sends the bike slewing across the henro path. Wet gravel crunches beneath my tires. Perplexed, Mas stops, pushes up his shades with gloved hand.

“Wait for me at Twenty-six,” I shout to him over the wind roar. “Something I have to do. It’s all right. Don’t worry. Go on. Go. Scoot.”

Alone with the wind and the rising ocean, I order one of my paper demons from the black box. The deep-throated mantra of the bell is heard before its bearer is seen. Presently, Mr. Spider tops the rise.

“Settai, Mr. Spider.” I hold the folded slip of paper out to him.

“May this pilgrim ask what it is?” says Mr. Spider, settling with a hiss of hydrolastic struts into repose.

“A powerful talisman, bestowing health, vitality, and blessing upon all who meditate on it.”

He laughs, swaying in his support cradle.



“It will need to be an exceedingly powerful talisman indeed.” But he accepts it.

“When you no longer need it, pass it on to another,” I tell him, though by that time the time-lock paper will have disintegrated. “Until then, you must not let another person see it.”

“You can imagine a day when I will have no need for health, vitality, and blessing?”

Right toe into toe-clip, ready to push off. Wind eddies under the rim of my henro hat, lifting it. I could not have offered him the naked hope of regeneration, for he would not have dared accept something that, should it be false, would destroy him. Yet each time he contemplates Tiferet, it will slip past hopes and fears into due place where scarred, severed nerve fibers will grow again, where dead synapses will flicker and fire, bones strengthen, muscles firm and flex, legs walk.

“I can imagine that day,” I say. At the point of the next headland I look back to admire the tiny, resolute figure—infinitesimal in this huge landscape—of Mr. Spider pressing on through the summer storm. I look, and I look, and I wait, and I watch, but there is no sign of him. No sign of him at all.

*We Two, Pilgrims Together.*

BECAUSE HE TOLD HER to meet him in a Hi-Victorian majolica-tile waxed-wood and patinated-brass bar he despised; because when she arrived she found him alone in a booth drinking brandy that he detested, she knew what had happened. She let it work itself out under its own gravity; dark, cold subterranean waters following cracks and seams and fault lines.

“When I was eight my grandmother died,” he began, twirling the stem of his brandy glass between thumb and forefinger. “She left me a pair of little ornaments that used to stand on her dressing table; a peasant boy whistling and a girl with a rabbit. They’re on my bookshelf. You laughed at them. Cheap ornaments, the sort of thing you get on a day at the seaside; terminally tacky. But they outlived my grandmother, those two china ornaments. And they could outlive me. The life of Ethan Ring, passed into nothing, gone, forgotten, but still that barefoot girl would be cuddling her rabbit, that boy whistling down the wind with his hands in his pockets. It was like ice in my heart, that realization, like a huge, dark wall at the edge of life, so tall you couldn’t get over it, so wide you couldn’t get around it, overshadowing every waking thought and deed, and every day, every minute of every day, every tick of your watch, growing closer, taller, wider. For three months, I couldn’t go anywhere, see anyone, do anything without seeing the shadow of mortality in them.”

“We’ve immortality now,” Luka said, thinking she gave comfort.

“We’ve ghosts and memories, for those that can pay.”

Men in suits with digiphones and Olivetti/ICL Mark 88 bioprocessors folded into their inside pockets came crowding into the Hi-Victorian bar, cawing and crowing with that deliberate loudness particular to men in suits. With digiphones. And Olivetti/ICL Mark 88s.

“Marcus died this morning. Eighteen minutes past eleven.”

“Fuck... Ethan.”

“At eleven-twelve he came out of the coma. At eleven-thirteen, he started convulsing. At eleven-eighteen, everything flat-lined. Twenty-three minutes later he was pronounced clinically dead and they took his liver and kidneys and pancreas. They left his heart and corneas. There was nothing left of them, they said. I was with him when he came out of it. For a moment he was himself, he was Marcus, waking up from a nightmare. Then

it was as if he remembered something, saw something, a nightmare that blew out every neuron in his skull.”

“Christ, Ethan... the fracters.”

Tracing the damp rings left by the glasses on the much-graffitied tabletop, Ethan Ring nodded.

“I caught a glimpse of it when I found him. It was like someone had hit me across the back of my neck with a piece of four by two. I couldn’t walk, couldn’t see properly for days after. God knows how long he’d been staring at it. Luka, I took the disk. I couldn’t let them find it.”

“Get rid of it, Ethan. Drop it in the river, dump it in a trash compactor, burn it, get rid of it. What I tell you three times is true. It’s death.” She took his face between her hands, then struck him hard across the cheek. Men in suits turned, made animal jeering noises.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” She struck him again. “Do it. Or you’ll never see me again.”

She had never looked so beautiful to Ethan as on the end of that blow.

For two days the disk sat in a Prisunic bag on his folding kitchenette-space table. On the evening of the second day, at about Soap Opera Time, she called him up.

“Have you done it yet?”

“Not yet; Luka, I’m still thinking...”

She hung up.

For two days more the disk sat on top of the Prisunic bag on his folding kitchenette-space table. It kept creeping into his peripheral vision. At the start of the ads in the middle of Coronation Street, she called him again.

“Well, have you done it?”

“I’m going to, tomorrow, I promise...”

She hung up.

For a further two days it sat in his backpack with a pair of hiking boots with the socks still stuffed into them while he vacillated between ax petrol deep water office block foundations. During one of those Great Scenes in the Rover’s Return, she rang.

“Well?”

“Luka, it’s not that simple...”

“It’s as simple as yes or no, Ethan.”

“Luka...”

Prrrrrrrrrr.

“Luka!”

He took the backpack to a bus to a train to a biopower taxi to the door of the Nineteenth House and his co-mothers.

“It’s Luka,” said the sandwich Empress, recently out-franchised.

“He’s got her pregnant,” said the ex-dealer in Futures, anticipating new lives to welcome into the embrace of the kinship.

“He’s in trouble with the cops,” said the jewelry maker.

“It’s drugs,” said the telecommuting designer of European farming bulletins.

“No one gets busted for drugs anymore,” said Nikki Ring.

“Well?” they all said.

“I’m all right,” Ethan Ring said, which every mother knows for a lie when she hears it. “I need a little time to think things over.”

The time ran out at four twenty-three A.M. at the dark end of the beach, where the lights of the condos and the yellow glow of the newly rebuilt marina did not reach. Trekking down with his backpack, Ethan encountered a man out running in astonishing rubber gear.

“Morning,” said Ethan Ring. The man in astonishing rubber fled. Down where the tar-scabbed foam styrene and fragments of drift net washed up, he set down Marcus’s disk, anointed it with paint thinners, and tore a match from a book bearing the crest of a doubtful Greek restaurant. A meteor crossed the sky.

“Fuck it”

He sent the matchbook, with its memories of souvlaki and salmonella, spinning after the fading meteor. Backpack heavy across one shoulder, he walked through the soft sand toward the lights of the town to tell Luka Casipriadin what he had done.

One week later, Luka Casipriadin applied for a transfer to the École des Beaux Arts et Desinées in Paris and moved out of the flat upstairs from Ethan Ring to address unspecified.

AFTER TEN YEARS THE smell of paint thinner has left the demon box. The certainties and dogmas of those years have likewise faded: from the Heisenbergian perspective of early thirtyhood I understand that Ethan Ring walking along that beach beneath the fall of early spring meteors must have had some compelling reason for not destroying the Sefirah disk. But I cannot remember what it was.

I find Mas's Dirt Wolf propped against a wall beside a public telecom bubble at Twenty-six. I tap the plastic to let him know I have arrived. Instantly, he cuts short his call and hangs up. English. I heard him speaking English. I note a number penciled on the User Information Chart: doodled Kabukimen identify it. A Yawatahama code.

"Who was that?" I ask. False innocence.

"Just a friend I haven't seen for some years," he answers. False ingenuousness. Liars both, we go up to the temple to pray for grace from the hands of Kobo Daishi. Armed and armored security police checking identities at the Shinto simulator look long and hard at us as we bypass the crowds and go up the shallow steps to the Butsu Hall. On their jackets and helmets is the eagle and lightning bolts of Tosa Securities Incorporated.

THEY CAME DOWN FOR him as the band at the Thursday night spot in the deconsecrated church played its final cover. Since losing Luka, Ethan Ring had thrown himself into the regular class bacchanalias with the desperate enthusiasm of a man watching the trap of his own limitations close around him.

“Why won’t she come back to me?” he confided to Kirstie-Lee, the class tramp who was wrapping her pink lycra thighs around his waist and her tongue around his cochlea because he might, sometime, someplace, be of Political Value to her.

And they came in through both sets of doors and fire exits. *What?* Chairs tables bottles rolling over *unh?* the band pulling plugs and hurrying backstage “*Luka!*” but it was in fact a big pig policeman spread-eagling him against the wall with the posters for legendary bands from the glittering 1970s, kicking his legs apart, fishing in his pockets “*What the...?*” and coming out with *something* between his fingertips, *something* that looked like a Ziploc plastic bag with *something* in it that looked exactly like marbley-red pills in the shape of winged cherub heads.

“Now, wot ’ave we ’ere, den?”

“You put them there,” Ethan said, utterly incredulous. “You bastards!”

“Language, sir,” said the big pig policeman spraying aerosol hallucinogens in Ethan Ring’s face and tables chairs bottles band classmates and Kirstie-Lee unfolded into huge angel wings of light.

THE TOILET. THAT WAS the first thing. It was a metal slit in the floor.

The graffiti. That was the second thing. It was in a language full of doubled vowels, vaguely Hanseatic-looking.

The food. That was the third thing. It was exquisite. There was even a bottle of a beer he had never been able to justify on student budgets.

“Oh, Christ, I’m in Belgium,” he said and threw up into the metal slit in the floor. When the last abreaction to the hallucinogens had passed, they came and took him from the rubber-floored cell to a woman with red glasses and lots of rings on her fingers, which she constantly twisted and turned. From the way she tilted her head toward him as he sat down in the comfortable chair he understood she was blind.

“Ghent, actually,” she said in the idiomatic but slightly ungainly English of those not born to it.

“Ghent,” Ethan Ring said. “What’s in Ghent?”

“The European Common Security Secretariat.”

“Isn’t this a little excessive for a drugs bust?”

The blind woman smiled and from the drawer in her desk took a mega-density computer disk. It smelled faintly, but distinctly, of paint thinner.

“Oh, shit.” Then, conclusions colliding like subatomic particles. “You broke into my flat. My flat...”

“It fell into our bailiwick when the police resurrected the hard disk data your friend was working on before the, ah, accident? The police technician is out of intensive care, but it’s debatable whether he will ever regain full control of his motor functions.”

Nightmare trip. Someone had sold him something in the men’s toilets and any moment now he would wake on his own or someone else’s floor with a weapons-grade migraine.

“I must admit I’m a little disappointed in you, Mr. Ring. I’d expected more of the designer of these...”

“Fracters. Lady, just who are you?”

The blind woman smiled with the minimalism of those who fear how much may be displayed on a face.

“We are a Research and Development Division of the European Common Security Secretariat. Our field of activity is psychological

techniques.”

“The fracters.”

“Exactly, Mr. Ring. We know from Mr. Cranitch’s notebooks of the existence of over one hundred fracters, as you call them, on that disk; psychological weapons of a power and refinement that makes our current projects look as sophisticated as Halloween masks and calling rude names.”

“You went through Marcus’s room? You picked through his stuff?”

“Mr. Ring, you really will have to learn to be less scrupulous when you are working for us.”

“I don’t remember agreeing to any prospective employment.”

“It’s a simple either/or, Mr. Ring. The ‘either’ is: Go back to university. Complete your course. Get your qualification. Keep the computer. Keep the fracter programs. You have the passwords: keep them. We will give you a job in European Public Relations, pay you, protect you, keep you safe. In return for this, use the fracters for us when we need them. It will not be often. It may be never.

“The ‘or’ is: Take your chances with the White Americans, the Pacific Rimmers, Pan-Islam. Frankly, I can’t see them taking time to have this discussion with you. Tell me, how long do you think you could bear to watch your girlfriend—what’s she called, Luka Casipriadin—what is that, Armenian, Georgian?—how long could you watch her being raped by dogs? Two hours? Four hours? Eight, even? And once they had what they wanted I think you’d find they’d forget about any gentleman’s agreements they might have made. A bullet in the left eye is current *mode d’emploi* of the PRCPS Security corporations.”

“You’re not frightening me,” he said, which is only ever said by those who are very, very afraid.

The blind woman set a black cellphone on the desk beside the Sefirah disk.

“Call her. Luka Casipriadin. It should be breakfast time; she always was a late riser. I don’t see how she stomachs that bran mush muck every day when they do excellent croissants in the École refectory. I suppose the Californian raisins help. The code from Ghent for Paris is 00 33 1.”

“Fuck you, you bitch. Fuck you to hell.”

“You’re welcome to try, Mr. Ring. Do you want to accept now or think about it?”



“Is there any point?”

“Should I take that to be an affirmative?”

“You should.”

“I’m glad, Mr. Ring. You see, there is a small button on the arm of my chair that I really didn’t want to have to press. I was a little... economical with the truth. We couldn’t really have let you take the ‘or’ option and gone to the Yankees, or the Islamics. The side of the desk facing you conceals a compressed-gas-powered guillotine—most sharp.” She left her seat, came around the desk. Her fingers brushed Ethan Ring’s thigh, spidered up two steps above his navel. “It would have cut you cleanly in two”—her fingers tapped black denim shirt still smelling of beer, smokes, and spray-crazy —“just about here.”

Tappy tap.

IF IT WERE ETHAN Ring making this pilgrimage, he would observe that life is a circular pilgrimage from nothingness to nothingness, the Temple Zero of nonexistence, up the steep ascents of circumstance and Murphy's Law to mountaintops of self-realization, down long easy descents when sore spirits can relax from pushing the intractable mechanism of living on through history, from dark sea caverns of acedia, filled with the ocean-sound of mortality to six-lane highways crammed with rushing, prehistoric behemoths.

Strange: the more I re-create of the life of Ethan Ring, the less there is of him that I can recognize in me. Some grace of Kobo Daishi, that I can no longer draw absolutes from particulars as he once would have in self-justification. My homily would be that the Buddha-head rests as comfortably in the Shinamo gear-train of a twenty-four-speed MTB as in the face of Kokuzo carved into the flesh of a living tree and that the temples of true, real, burning *living* are so few and far between that we must hold hard to our sacred moments.

Long hard haul down the south coast of Muroto. Only four temples between the West Temple and Kochi City; there would be much room for the contemplation of the Buddha of the gear-train were it not that our way lies along the main provincial highway. A fifty-meter cloudbase discharges a steady, penitential drizzle; thundering truck/trailer combos spray us with a viscous film of oily grit. At a *bangai* incorporated into a syrup-station and travel lodge we are given settai of tea and tangerines by the proprietor: a brief blessing. Then: smog masks and wraparounds; helmet down and push.

When we find a bas-relief finger on a squat pillar pointing down a muddy footpath through birches and alders, it is like the manifestation of the saint himself. Joyfully we turn off the road and hurtle as fast as we can down the old path among the birch trees.

The henro path leads us into a rich, timeless agricultural landscape. We cycle through grass-roofed villages, along narrow causeways between flooded paddies where mud-smeared wading robots tend crops of tall, slender shoots—tatami reeds, Mas informs me. Absurdly, I feel like the hero in a spaghetti Western. Though my plastic rainsheet bestows some characteristics of the Man With No Name, this awareness comes not from

any change in myself, but in my surroundings, so pervasive yet subtle it is several kilometers farther before I can pinpoint it. On every house. On every shop. On every vehicle and robot and biogas plant and windpump and gatepost and signpost: the mark of the eagle and the lightning: *Protected by Tosa Securities Incorporated*.

“Like a set from a Kurosawa movie,” agrees Mas, drawing alongside. Troubled in spirit, we press on and the rain steepens into a general downpour.

In an attempt to expose us to a wider world than typography and corporate logos, the mandarins of Graphic Communications decreed that we attend weekly lectures on whatever particular hobbyhorse the tutorial staff liked to ride. The only one I remember was Jake Byrne, our year tutor, proposing his outrageous/right-wing/racist/xenophobic theory of sociological inertia. *Reader's Digest* condensed version: national characteristics as bred in bone as hair/eyes/coloring: re *Japan:zaibatsus* collapse, arcologies burn, Euro/Islamic graverobbers dismember, honorable salaryperson throws *off* business suit *out* come swords/armor/helmet waiting in the attic, hello boys it's the Last Remake of *Kagemusha: the Shadow Warrior*. If Masahiko can no longer see the Japan of his childhood in the Japan of his thirty-somethings, perhaps we should not be surprised to find this prosperous farming land the fiefdom of some neo-feudal private security company.

I feel very far from the Approved Tourist Route.

The inscription tells us that the shrine has stood for three hundred and twenty-eight years, and implies that it will be here long after the incongruous modern green of a private golf course straddling the henro path has returned to nature again. Its guardian is newer, and more transient, than even the golf course. Mas dismounts, crouches down, obscenely fascinated. His raincape sheds sheets of water. Small tearing animals have ripped away lips, cheeks, eyes; the ears have been reduced to two knobs of gnawed gristle. Where it has been tattooed, the skin has remained intact by virtue of some preservative feature of the inks. The plastic helmet is impervious to both elements and animals, the plastic ident tag likewise, concealed among early summers burst of rain-wet bluebells, aconites, and wild garlic. On the edge of the rough, the head of the young akira keeps watch on the plaid trousers and Mr. Dormie club-bags and biopower golf karts. Are the junior

account managers and sales executives applauding beneath their corporate golf umbrellas—*golfu* is too important a thing to be surrendered to a mere monsoon—when Mr. Chairman hits one straight down the middle aware of the barbarism not a hundred meters from the thirteenth tee? What are the Acceptable Levels for an uninterrupted round of Royal and Ancient?

Mas has found an accountholder's plastic smartcard among the wet spring flowers. Embossed on its plastic face is the ubiquitous thunder-eagle of Tosa Securities Inc.

"Christ's sake, Mas, leave it." Foolish pilgrim, who does not recognize an omen.

It is only a few hundred meters across rough, fairway, and Number Thirteen green—we can see the marker stone at the edge of the woodlands, the henro path itself wending into the trees—but among the golf karts puttering and stuttering over the grass is a blue and white buggy adorned with ToSec's thunder-eagle. The angularities of light-power armor beneath Adidas trackwear are visible from our position on the edge of the rough. I cannot see enforcers who tear off a trespassing akira's head taking kindly to two henro leaving tire tracks across the apron of the par three Number Thirteen.

We are effectively stymied. We cannot go forward, we will not go back, not twenty kilometers through Clint Eastwood country to the Tourist Route again. Therefore, we go around. Golf courses only seem to go on forever. A hundred or so meters back, past the dark shrine, we find a path—little more than trampled vegetation—headed in what seems like generally the right direction. After twisting and turning through riotous vegetation running wild in expectation of summer the trail plunges headlong into a vast sugarcane plantation. The rain patters on the alien cane. We have no idea where we are going; we trust that a straight path must have a destination. After ten minutes—not so much a plantation, this, as a monoculture—we hit a wide access route and come out of the claustrophobic cane on top of the cane farmer himself engaged in some cannicultural activity involving standing in the back of a Nissan pickup.

Guilty both legally and spiritually of trespass we accelerate past him before he can protest. At the sound of a shouting voice I glance over my shoulder. The farmer is waving something in his hand—I cannot be certain

at this distance but it has the hard glitter of electronics. What is he shouting? Dogs? What about them?

Hydrogas shocks notwithstanding, the bike rattles as it takes the ruts, and I glance back again, just for an instant. The farmer is in his pickup now, driving after us. I shout to Mas but he has already seen and, one foot thrust out as a brake, skid-turns ninety degrees into a narrow file where no pickup can follow.

Dogs?

*Somethings.* Fragments of movement Discordant patterns of light and shade within the regularity of the head-high sugarcane. Glimpses. Glances. Flickers. More than five, I reckon, less than twenty. And not human. Too low, too fast, too relentless to be human. Mas too senses them; a glance is the signal for us to flick into high gear. The hunters in the cane match us without a flicker of hesitation. I hear Mas swear. I glance back. Dogs. A hunting pack of ten, closing on us. Cancerous bulbs of bioprocessor implants blister their skulls; each wears the unmistakable ToSec logo spray-painted on its chest.

That hint of electronics I had seen in the farmer's hand was a command unit.

That time, in Marrakech, Luka took me to a dog pit in the old city. Under the white heat of the kilowatt floods we watched the augmented dogs tear and rip and spray red arterial blood over the front rows. We watched them die on the bloody sand and still they tore at each other, enslaved even beyond death to the commands pouring from their sweating, screaming masters' control gloves.

Except this man was not threatening us. He was warning us.

Mas's sudden brake and swerve almost sends me into him. A hundred or so meters ahead, a second pack of augmented dogs is bounding toward us with elegant deadly fluidity.

I have seconds. Only seconds...

"Close your eyes!" I shout to Mas and they are on us. The lead dog leaps. I meet it with my naked left hand. It spins into the cane, neck broken, writhing, yelping hideously.

If the right hand is truth, what is the left?

Answer: destruction. Keter: the Void, Annihilation, the shock fracter. Animal, human, artificial intelligence: whatsoever has eyes to see, it will

destroy.

Wherever I turn my left hand, dogs jerk and spasm and fall. They are savage, they are deadly, but those are not enough, not against an enemy that attacks on sight. Five. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty. In as many seconds. The cane field is littered with twisted meat, kicking in the red mud. Slipping between close-packed cane, I go from dog to dog, clamping my left hand over each face until the spasms stop. Mercy mercy. On its side in a drainage ditch, a dog beats its stump tail weakly, watches, panting, with puppy-dog eyes free from the unclean light of simulated sentience. Its breath is warm on my skin. *Hush, hush there*, I whisper in English as I press my left hand over its eyes. It jerks. Once.

A sugarcane farmer, however large his holding, could not afford twenty cybercanines. A time-share and a control unit, yes, but the true owners, the true masters, are elsewhere and cannot be oblivious of what has happened to their property. Or of us. Why would a farmer who had warned us of his dogs not stop them with his command unit? Unless, in a higher place, control was taken away from him, by someone who knew exactly what he/she/it was looking for.

Crouching, hands over eyes (See-No-Evil), Mas flinches at the touch of my hand on his shoulder.

“It’s over, Mas. Let’s go.” I want this thunder-eagle country and the evil it has forced me into far behind me. Curled around the thick, padded handlebars, my palms burn as if freshly branded. All masters of the dark arts agree: there is a terrible, seductive joy in the practice and use of their power. It felt good all those other times when I used my power, when I felt like God, that there was no authority on earth could deny me. The masters never mention that there is a price for that thrill, as there is a price for everything, and the price is pain. It can be emotional, it can be spiritual, it can be physical. But it never misses. The pain will always find you. It cannot be begged off, bargained with, wished away.

We first met in a large, high-ceilinged, windowless room, the pain and I, echoing and resonant, the kind of room where the door merges into the wall behind you and seems never to have been. Gray. All gray. The chair: gray. The Bosch industrial robot: gray. The only color: the dyes in their plastic tubes; the needles poised above them.

“Will it hurt?” the blind woman in the red glasses asked as she strapped my wrists to the arms of the gray chair, opened the fingers one two three four and thumb five, taped them down.

“It will hurt,” I said and because she was that particular kind of coward that cannot bear another’s pain, she slipped the disk into the robot and closed the door behind her.

The physical pain was the least part. The true pain was the sense of violation, that the dyes the flicking needles were stitching into the palms of my hands were spreading through my bloodstream, along my nerve fibers, branding me within as indelibly as I was marked without. In Kafka there is a long and terrible story about some engine of execution that wrote a man’s crimes into his flesh with needles. Crimes past: but what about crimes yet to be committed? Can the punishment precede the crime? If there is a point at which the long death and rebirth of Ethan Ring is focused, it is the points of those five colored needles.

Burning. My hands are burning so hot I am afraid to look at them. I want to stop. I want to cry out. I want to plunge them into deep, cold water. Guilt. Burning. Heat. Heat is an energy, energy I can use to push me on, push me away, push me through to the place beyond guilt. Push through. Push through. Or the things you have sealed up inside another life will push through into you. Into him. Into me. Me. Him.

SUZY MAGEE ANNETT, AGE size and three-quarters, westbound with her mother to some kind of marital reconciliation by the ocean, had stared for most of the semi-orbital flight at the new plastic socket one and one half centimeters behind the lobe of Ethan Ring's right ear, ringed by a halo of red itching scar tissue to which the eye could not but be drawn because they had shaved half his skull to accommodate it.

"Mummy Mummy Mummy that mans got a hole in his head," said Suzy Magee Annett, unable to contain herself any longer, and was told not to be so nosy about other people and go to sleep and when he thought they were finally asleep he took out the tap and slipped it into the socket and so learned that the European Pacific Rim network had uncovered a Pan-Islamic mole and that he was being sent to find out what he knew and take it away from him. Except that Suzy Magee Annett was a bad little girl and watched through half-closed eyes the disgusting fascinating spectacle of a man with a worm in his head.

They had the man in one of the last Barbary Coast wooden houses to escape the Race Wars. He was naked and fastened to a deeply beautiful Shaker chair with brown adhesive tape, which seemed excessive to Ethan Ring. He was a deeply beautiful man.

"Leave me," said Ethan Ring, picking at the flaking skin around his implant. He showed the man his right hand and said, "Tell me your secrets."

While the man taped to the Shaker chair spooled off names and addresses and informants and dead drops into a microtaper, Ethan Ring printed out the Hokhmah fracter and hid it in the palm of his gloved left hand.

"Forget it," he said, opening his left hand. And it was gone.

"That's it," he told the others, handing them the microcassette.

"Good," they said. "Now do the rest. Take it all away."

"Everything?" he said.

"Everything. We want them to be afraid of us. Very afraid of us."

So he went back to the naked man and took away all the numbers that might have identified him. License, passport, ID, Social Security, buckcard, credit accounts, e-mail, street name and number, locker number. Gone.

His friends. Gone.



His lovers. Gone.

His enemies. Gone.

His brothers, his sisters, his aunts and uncles and cousins and father and mother. Gone.

The next day Ethan Ring came and peeled the last ten years of his life off like the rind of an orange. College years. Dawn at Zabriskie Point. The time at the Faculty Club pool. The time on the floor in Belsize Park. The adrenaline ecstasy of making it to the top of Half Dome. Getting drunk in Paris in the rain. Dancing in the snow at Noo Year. Gone.

Teenage years, high school angst and acne, first fucks. Gone.

Vertiginous adolescence as the vast incoherencies of the adult world began to make sense. Gone.

Childhood, prechildhood, the neural rainforest of memories, impressions, sensations he had forgotten he had ever forgotten. Gone.

The third day Ethan Ring took away everything he knew. How to drive a car. How to speak Spanish. How to cook an omelet, how to ride a bicycle. The names of the twelve nearest stars. Gone. The words to old Elvis Costello songs. Gone. The interstate route map and the Northwest Pacific domestic timetable. Gone. Walt Whitman. Emily Dickinson. The Trout Quintet. Meat Loaf. Gone. History. Geography. Physics. Chemistry. Biology. Art. Music. Gone. Reading. 'Riting. 'Rithmetic. Gone.

Only one thing remained.

"Tell me your name."

"Titus Witters. My name is James Titus Witters," said the naked man taped into the wooden Shaker chair. "Please, man, not that, leave me that..."

Gone.

"He's yours now," said Ethan Ring. He got into his hire car, tried to drive back to his hotel, and got caught in the twelve-block gridlock caused by Mrs. Marta Radetczy age sixty-eight's inadvertent stepping into the path of a V.W./G.M. biopower Bagels'R'Us truck. Otherwise he would have driven past the Pendereski Gallery without noticing that it was celebrating *that very night* the gala opening of a new work, entitled *Fantasia*, by hot hot new talent Luka Casipriadin.

He thought the suit made him look like a riverboat gambler but the man in the hire shop was adamant that it was very suave, very chic, very sir,

sir. From the far side of the crowded room she recognized him—his undisguisable red hair, he supposed, even more conspicuous half shaved away—and came cutting cleanly through the shoals of society/charity/art/party/drinky/dopey and doc.

“You look like a riverboat gambler.” She ran the palm of her hand along the line of his jaw.

“You look like a dream found in a gutter one hour before dawn, down with the needles and guns and dead.” He ran his fingers through the short stubble on either side of her crest of black hair.

“I love it when you talk mucky,” she said, drawing him away through the throng of cocktail glasses, lip gloss, and Cartier pill-cases. Her fingers caressed his socket. “Your bosses must think a lot of you to fit you up with one of these. Come on. Got something to show you. Preview of coming attractions. For your eyes only.” Outside on the fire escape a light drizzle was falling. She swung over the rail and dropped into the neon-shadowed alley, landing surefooted, cat-coiled. A two-finger whistle: “Yo! Oddjob! To me!”

Stirrings in the shadows, clicking, whirrings, a gleam of light from a polished surface. A Dornier Hi-performance Industrial Robot stepped into the alley, bobbing on cantilever legs, gleaming yellow carapace spotted with rain. Luka rested a black gloved hand on its curved plastic skull.

“Here. Catch.” She skimmed a black something up at him. A snatch of immaculate kid-gloved hands: an Olivetti/IBM Mark Twenty VR-tap.

“The difference between this new bioprocessor stuff and the old clunky noninvasive gear has to be experienced to be believed,” she said. “Obviously, you were sent by God; Ethan Ring in San Francisco with a shiny new hole in his head. You get the deluxe wide-screen edition. One word of warning: be not fooled by the name. Fucking Walt Disney this isn’t.”

Fucking Walt Disney this wasn’t.

“We’ve all got them,” Luka explained as they slipped through the rain-wet streets, splashing through puddles of neon Timor and Vietnamese, the riverboat gambler and the fetish queen with their robot skipping behind. “But we’re afraid of them, we’re afraid that if people find out they’ll think we’re dark and evil and perverted or silly and stupid and fatuous, while in their own heads, those other people are exactly the same. Exactly the

same.” Around them fin de siècle brownstones and leery chromium-age office blocks erupted into organic volcanoes of lilac-scented blossoms or stretched into window-studded trees whose trunks upheld the cotton-candy sky; manhole covers became smirking demon faces; every mailbox was a welcoming vagina with lolling forked tongue and grazing pedicabs, bizarre bucolic hybrids half man/half bicycle, bounded like startled gazelles from predatory taxis circling like checkerboard sharks.

“The processing equipment’s aboard Oddjob; we’re hooked in real-time through a mega-plex infrared link. Micro-cameras on the headband. Come a long way from Umberto Boccioni.” The Bay Bridge uprooted booted feet and went buckarooing over Oakland while a fifteen-year-old girl confessed a long and labyrinthine dream into Ethan Ring’s middle ear. Luka pulled him toward the gateway of a covered market that shapeshifted into ideogram-stained teeth, a swallowing neon-lit maw. Within, the biogas-lit stalls with their pendulous racks of edibles and smokables became the pulsing organs of a post-cybernetic bodyscape; the bustling crowd, shouting in a dozen different Southeast Asian dialects, were swarms of platelets, macrophages, and antibodies.

Above the inner voice of a man describing a fantastic mescaline voyage beneath the linked geodesics of his own skin, Ethan shouted, “You’re a sick woman, Luka Casipriadin.”

“These aren’t my head dreams,” she shouted back. “This is some poor bastard of an HIV IV victim’s dream of one final DPMA trip into himself to battle the disease that has, by now, probably killed him. They’re all live. All real. 0898 FANTASY—at the tone leave your darkest dream, your brightest hope, confess it to Luka absolute confidentiality assured.”

“Except you blow it up over three city blocks and people pay to have it shoved through a little hole in their heads.”

“They all knew what I wanted to do with their fantasies. Logged five thousand calls in the three months I kept the line open. Tapped some deep, dark confessional urge in the population of the Greater Bay Area. You think I’m sick, you should hear some of the ones I didn’t use. I’d like to think that some of my sources will come and look at it and feel that their openness about their fantasies will help other poor repressed bastards.”

“Even for you that is a singularly weak self-justification.”

“Isn’t it just?”

The puckered, neon-spangled rectum of the market shat them and their yellow Dornier out at the foot of twenty stories of First Pacific Rim Bank morphing into a naked twenty-year-old man with fabulous black hair and muscles. As a fifty-something woman's voice whispered sweet sexual imaginings to the accompaniment of a reconstructed Julie Andrews singing a pornographic version of "Favorite Things" ("Naked black sailors all tied up with string"), powerlines snapped and came twining through the air to coil and knot around the straining leviathan.

"Fucking hell," said Ethan Ring, thinking of the man in the Shaker chair in the last wooden house in San Francisco.

Onward.

Through faerylands and Disneylands and *petit* Arcadias two blocks by three, heavens and hells, through blizzards of dollar bills while palm trees bent their mop heads close together and sang old Prince numbers in close harmony and cathedrals took off like gothic rockets beneath skies filled with plump Georges Méliès desmoiselles dressed as shooting stars and comets until, beneath a floodlit Coit Tower ecstatically transubstantiating into a Hieronymous Bosch cromlech/mushroom/phallus complete with dancing nymphs, flying sharks and goose-stepping storks, she kissed him. Hard. In the mouth. With much tongue.

"I could tie you up with string," she said and pulled the tap out of his skull and vanished all dreams and yearnings and fantasies in a candy-colored pop! "Ethan, I'm sorry. Those years, what I did to you. I'm a coward. I'm like Buddha, I like to think I'm living in a perfect painless world of art and artifice, then comes the first sign of hurt and I press disengage. Fuck, even for me, that's a singularly weak self-justification. Okay, Ethan Ring, here I am, if you'll have me." She slapped the Dornier's yellow shell. "Get the hell home, Oddjob."

They ate things cooked in aluminum foil in a Timorese sampan restaurant. They took a mopedcab down through the old Italian and slightly less old Vietnamese and newer Indonesian and new North Australian and newest Southern-States-white-trash-shanty districts to the bridge where they told the driver to wait for them, which meant that they were not going to go halfway and throw themselves off. They drank bourbon in a bar and got drunk but not too. They went back to Ethan Ring's towertop suite with its

view over the Euclidian geometry of city lights interrupted by the Mandelbrotian mathematics of the Bay.

“Wouldn’t you love to stand naked in front of that window?” Luka said, sitting on his bed and heaving and grunting at her boots. Ethan slipped off his riverboat gambler’s jacket and brocade waistcoat and was unfastening his pearl shirt buttons when she noticed.

“That would be a lot easier if you took your gloves off.”

A pause, while something like a spiked fist reached into his chest and tore out his heart.

“Ethan, what have you done with your hands, Ethan?”

He told her. His head reverberated to a vertiginous white roar as he told her about what he had done to his hands, to himself, to the man in the Shaker chair. He stood at the window and watched the transparent dirigibles filled with cold-gas holograms for diet Coke and Volkswagen-G.M. and Chanel 15 drift across the beautiful city until he heard the door click shut and lock behind him.

RAW FIRE; BURNING DOWN my throat. I cough, retch, *fire* goes down into my lungs. I spew up a spray of phlegm and bile and burning.

“It’s all right, Eth. Take it easy.” Another splash of liquid heat across my lips, down my throat. Distant monosyllables; Japanese. “Old Suntory, Eth. For the shock.”

*Mas.* My voice is a ghastly rattlesnake rasp. I push the glass away.

“You’re all right now. The Tanazakis say we can stay here until you are able to go on.” Feeling behind my right ear my fingers encounter only the plastic disk of an empty socket. *Touch* solidifies the unfocused color field surrounding me into objects: a rectangle of light is a window filled with concrete-colored sky, a lozenge of fitful cerise and lilac a neon sign, a circle in the bottom right corner of the streaming window: a sticker, PROTECTED BY TOSA SECURITIES INCORPORATED. I try to struggle free from the bed; Mas’s hand is on my chest.

“Easy, Eth. You’ve had a bad shock.”

“Mas...”

“You came off the bike. You hit a rut. You were riding like... like something possessed, a demon. It’s a miracle you weren’t impaled on the cane.”

The dogs. The cane field. I remember. A young woman—eighteen, twentyish—enters with tea.

“The farmer got you into the back of the pickup and brought you here. You were shaking all over. Like a fit. Like epilepsy.”

That’s the bargain it makes. You use it, it uses you, and more, each time. I take the cup of tea between my gloved hands, savor the good, clean scald of it.

“I’ve called her, Eth. She’s hiring a car, she’ll be here by morning. She’ll be able to help you.”

*She?* I want to ask, *she?* but a middle-aged woman has appeared at the side of the bed and is pressing self-adhesive tranquilizer dots to my acupuncture points. *She...?*

BIBLE STORIES FOR BUDDHISTS: The Good Samaritan found the traveler by the side of the road and brought him to an inn. In the three hundred and twelve years since Ruichi Tanazaki I, inspired by a vision of the face of the Daishi in the tea leaves at the bottom of a bowl, opened his teahouse for the succor of weary henro, successive generations have added and enlarged and expanded until now the Tanazaki-ya stands as a marvelous miscegeny moteldinergaragegiftshopgasstationpharmacybathhousebarbershopkaraokeparlorcathousepickupjoint; a true and honest tribute to the spirit of vernacular building that finds its highest expression in roadside architecture. The Smithsonian should have it heli-lifted whole and preserved, with its motley, polyglot crew of Tanazakis, generations ten through twelve, for the delight and elucidation of future, poorer descendants. Wandering in post-tranq blur through the warren of extensions, annexes, and additions trying to find Mas, I feel like an unnoticed animal stowing away on some surreal ark sailing up through history. I keep arriving in the same bar snug where a small peer group of salarypersons with their jackets off are toasting each other and singing along to a sat-tel pop channel. Every time, they are that little bit drunker, that little bit more nicely out of tune.

The diner is unlit save for the neons along the self-serve bar and the unregarded television glow from the booth where Mas is talking with the girl who brought me tea. They are the sole occupants. Comic book on poles and crushed plastic beer cans litter the melamine tabletop: I feel vaguely blasphemous at having interrupted a private moment. Mas introduces the girl, Mariko. The perfect hostess, she bows and brings beer from the cool cabinet; very cold, very good.

“Mas. How long has Luka been here?”

He offers me one from his pack of Tiger Tails.

“She was held up in Tokyo. She came down here the day before yesterday. We were to meet her in Yawatahama.”

I breathe in the smoke from the *cañabarro*, let it fry my head, just a little, let it knock me loose from the things that have been closing around me so inexorably. If you are going to sin, henro, then sin big, so that grace may all the more abound.

“It was her you were talking to, those long-distance calls. No wonder you switched the picture off.”

On the television, sumo wrestlers bump and grind silently in the sacred clay ring.

“It was planned long before Temple One. Back to that time you met in Capetown, when you told her you were thinking seriously of taking up my suggestion of the pilgrimage.”

“My God. A cozy little conspiracy. Where did you dream all this up, in bed together in some capsule hotel with a bottle of sake and pornographic comics?”

Though I know the depth of anger of which Mas is capable, the sudden nova-flare of it is still frightening.

“Do not ever, ever, talk about her that way. Ever, you bastard. Maier-Mikoyan commissioned a virtuality from her, up in Sapporo for the Ice Fest. We met there. She thought that the pilgrimage might be a way for you to break free. Save yourself, save your soul.”

“Well hallelujah for little Miss Salvation Army. So you knew about me all along. Was all that stuff, back at Muroto, made up for me too?”

For a moment I am certain, certain, that if there were anything sharper than a disposable chopstick to hand, Mas would have buried it in my throat.

“I don’t know what she sees in you. You are selfish, ungrateful, vicious, cowardly. You’re a child, Eth. She didn’t give away any of your fucking state secrets. You did that. You can’t even be trusted not to betray your country. She just said you were in trouble. Powerful trouble, and the pilgrimage might give you the space and strength to break free; that was all. And for some reason, I agreed to help her.

“She loves you. She has never loved anyone else and will never love anyone else and you hurt her. You have hurt her, you hurt her now, you will go on hurting her.”

“Oh, Christ, Mas.”

Voices, in the lobby. Mr. Tanazaki, and two others. Loud voices. Strong voices. Dangerous voices. I half rise, half turn in my seat, and they burst in through the door. Meat. Heavies. Akiras, two of. Camouflage parkas undecided between sickly neon and midnight black. Hair scraped back and thonged into oily pigtails. Wraparound visors streaked with alphanumerals; raster lines closing around my image.



I am on my feet, hands curled into loose fists in an instant of primal reaction. Laser sights paint red caste marks on my forehead and heart. Airborne dust traces them back to the Fiuzzi automatic pistols.

“You. You.” One red thread dances away to rest on the bridge of Mas’s nose. “With us.”

Shouting protest, Mr. Tanazaki tries to snatch a weapon. The red beam weaves over booths, ceiling, floor, then with the frightening casualness of chemically enhanced strength, the akira slams him against the cooler cabinet, smashes him with the butt of his weapon, smashes him, smashes him, smashes him. There is screaming in the lobby.

And I open my left hand.

Keter sends the akira—spasming, jerking, shivering—into the wall. In a flicker of violence, I am on top of him. All I know, all I understand, all I feel, is the anger, the years of anger, burning along my arm, drawing into a knot of white heat at the center of my left hand. I imagine my left hand pressed over his eyes and unholy joy blazes through me.

“Ethan! Leave him!” Mas. The second akira sends the searching finger of his targeting laser after me; I roll away, come into a crouch, left hand ready.

“No, Eth. Not this way.”

No. This is not the way. It was the way of Ethan Ring. It is not your way. My way. My hand opens like a lotus blooming. My right hand.

“Put the gun down.” The voice of absolute authority does not need to shout. Click of ceramics and steel on the floorboards. The laser sight draws a strict red terminator across the polished wood. “Squat down. On your heels. Hands on head. Stay that way until I tell you otherwise.”

He obeys. He cannot but. His camouflage parka turns cold neon blue.

“Who sent you?”

“Tosa Securities Aki Section Manager, on the instructions of the Chief Security Executive. Our Chapter are subcontractees.”

The classic pattern, divide and recruit your enemies. If even akiras serve and find it no dishonor, this land is more firmly in Tosa Securities’ fist than I had imagined. We cannot afford to remain even one hour more. Mrs. Tanazaki, Mariko, and eldest son are kneeling beside Mr. Tanazaki. There is a lot of blood and he does not move. Mrs. Tanazaki is rocking back and

forth, back and forth, back and forth. Younger son is making a call on the lobby desk phone.

“No!” I shout. “Leave it!” His fingers hesitate over the touch buttons, then decide. “Look at me,” I order, right hand upheld. In the dark lobby, his pupils dilate. “Leave it.” The voicepiece clicks into its cradle.

“It was only an ambulance,” he says. Mariko looks at me with such hatred it is like a rod of frozen iron thrust up my spine. My Healing and Tranquillity fracters could help Mr. Tanazaki until we are gone and it is safe to call an ambulance but Mariko would not accept my gift and anyway I cannot spare the few minutes it would take to print them out.

The pilgrimage is over. Destroyed. It was destroyed the first time I typed the words *what I tell you three times is true* in that dark room in the Morikawa farmhouse.

“Mas, we must go.”

“No, Ethan.” The refusal strikes like a bullet. “It’s always been shit and walk away, hasn’t it? Cycle into peoples lives, do your tricks, and cycle out again. These are the people who get left behind. Everything they have is here. They can’t leave when it all starts to slide. You come into their world, in one evening destroy it, and the next morning when the ToSec investigators come to find out what happened to their akiras, you are on your knees in some temple sanctuary praying for the Daishi to shrive your sins and enlighten your spirit. You don’t understand, you Europeans cannot understand; there is no higher principle, no unalienable human right to which they can appeal. No noble Western notion of fairness and justice and innocence until proved guilty. Tosa Securities is the law here.”

A bullet. A slow bullet chewing through bone and flesh and gristle into the heart of me with the cold, precipitous knowledge that those unshakable foundations of absolute law and the incorruptibility of its agents upon which my society rests complacently do not exist here. For most of human history; and now again, in this time of the fading of Western Industrial Democracy, law has been—is now—the province of power.

Once Mother Emma—the sandwich Empress—showed me how to catch shrews in a glass bottle. Enticed by catfood, they were lured into the neck (so far, so good) and down into the belly (so far, so better). Only after gorging themselves on liver-and-kidney Whiskas did they realize that they could not climb the smooth, sloping glass shoulders to the neck. Trapped. I

had thought myself free, but it had been the illusion of smooth, transparent walls. History: my own, that of the land through which I have been pursuing my own enlightenment, drew me onward, downward, to the thrill of playing with demons from which there is no return. Trapped.

My fists hammer melamine tabletop.

“There has to be an end to it, don’t you see, Mas? There has to be a way to live that doesn’t have violence as the solution to every question. I know what you’re asking, Mas. This is life. This isn’t a Kurosawa movie, this isn’t *Anime*. I said it at Turtle Beach, I say it again here, I am not fucking Kabukiman. We’re not paint or pixels or whatever the hell you use, we’re flesh, we’re blood. We die.”

Even as I speak I see the Tanazakis and behind them in the lobby, unseen, unpaying, guests. Mr. Morikawa killed by his naive belief in the inviolability of authority. The dispossessed of Tokushima, of all Japan, victims of misplaced faith in the chaotic gods of economics, and the akiras, the kids who hadn’t sold themselves to their enemies because they still believed in a mythic, perfect past. A nameless wind-cured head on a stick by a Kochi wayside shrine. Mas’s lover in her kneepads, elbow guards, and tight, cute volleyball shorts, killed by a dream of California. Others. Hundreds upon hundreds of others. Nameless, faceless, historyless, the payers of tolls and tithes and taxes, the buyers of permits and licenses and visas, the ones who bleed for a law that does not protect them.

I see a saint handing me a shot at redemption, a chance to pit my power not against the abstract, utilitarian pseudo-evils of planetary economics and *welt*-political expediency, but against actual, tangible, pragmatic, mundane tyranny. Evil. Simple. Straight. Undisguised and unambiguous. And with the chance to leave the world a different—better—place after from before. It always was heroes and angels, Luka. And I look away. I look away and so see him, reflected in the back bar mirror. Death dwells in mirrors; with every look, it grows a little, every day. Death, change, time. He is a tall man in his early thirties with wild red hair tied back. From the far side of the silvered glass where I banished him so he could never hurt me again, Ethan Ring beckons. He is me. I must embrace him. Accept him. What other way could it be? *Dogyo Ninin*. We Two, Pilgrims Together.

SCISSORS CUT, SNIP, SNIP. The red hair falls in long red coils to the flagstones of the courtyard garden. I lift a lock, the clean, bright scissors cut, it falls. Preparations for battle matter. Medieval knights-errant spent the night before their elevation at the altar in prayer.

I had Mr. Tanazaki installed in his bedroom with the angels of Tranquillity and Healing set at his head and feet to watch over him. Son Nobuo is watching over the comatose akira in a guestroom in an unused wing; in the next room I have put the second akira and set the angel Binah, the fracter that annihilates chrono-consciousness, on the back of the door to hold him frozen in time.

Every demon was at some time an angel. The half-life built into the unstable paper will keep the world safe from demons, or angels.

Built-in decay. Indeed.

Snip. Another piece of me falls. The garden may be no more than a handful of square meters of courtyard between two residential wings but all the world is here. A pool for ocean, rocks rising from fine, raked gravel mountains in the desert; a forest of bamboo, a stone lantern filled with bioluminescents for moon and the shrine to the generations of dead Tanazakis the spiritual focus. Early jasmine, late magnolia perfumes the air; the rain has ended, the night is supernaturally warm and still. *What am I going to tell Luka if you get killed?* Masahiko had asked.

See you in another life, Luka.

I run my fingers over the ragged stubble of my scalp. My preparations are almost complete. All I need now is one final piece of memory, the keystone, lowered into position and the bridge between what I was and what I am will be complete.

THE THEORY WAS THAT at any instant in political history there are two, and only two major power blocs. NATO vs. the SovBloc; (briefly) America vs. the Japanese Co-Prosperity Sphere; latterly (in these times when the bell-shaped curve of economic empire is at maximum forty years wide) Europe, her client states in the old Eastern Bloc and the shaky democracy of Suid-Afrika vs. the emergent, vigorous culture of a Pan-Islam that had unified Arabia with North Africa, was ratifying probationary membership status from the Dardanelles to Srinagar, and was whistling political *come-hithers* to Sub-Saharan Africa and the new Confederation of Black American States. Saracens and Crusaders faced off across the Straits of Gibraltar.

“With me playing Charlton Heston strapped onto his horse?”

As ever, my filmic allusions were lost on the blind woman from Ghent “Ideologically, we have no quarrel with Pan-Islam,” she said. “It’s our major trading partner; the new North African bourgeoisie keep most of France and Spain in work. We can’t even accuse them of religious fundamentalism anymore: Sidi Ali in Riyadh brew the best lager beer in the world, probably. It’s pure, old-fashioned imperialism. They want ours, we want theirs, and God or Allah help the nonaligned.”

Meaning: violent guest-worker labor disputes in Spain, Portugal, and southern France had been traced to the Islamic-Socialist Al Haq group that Pan-Islam, eager to *rapproche* with its neighbor, had offered to terminate as a gesture of good faith. As Strasbourg’s political strategists opined that détente might swing the nonaligned Beninian states into Cairo’s fold, Al Haq must be eliminated by Europa, thus heightening diplomatic tension and counter-swinging the Benin States back to Europe and with them most of Tropical Black Africa. Thus, hazed out with free-gee tranqs and Chaotic Social Dynamics Theory, I fell on a suborbital parabola toward Marrakech and the vital cultural heart of the new Islam.

The red city between the desert and the snows had always seduced Westerners; now with the brilliance and sophistication of the lost Imperial days restored, it had joined the line of new Bohemias: Paris, Berlin, Swinging London, Greenwich Village, Kathmandu. Little surprise, therefore, to find flyposted to a wall in the old city that had stood since the days of the Cid the name, face, and floppy Mohican of Luka Casipriadin. A

cartel of European industrials with taxes to avoid and North African markets to placate had culturally exchanged her via the Pan-Islam Arts Directorate and commissioned a room at some undisclosed site in the old city. She had rented a house there: Intelligence supplied address/phone/fax/e-mail and gave me a suitable rendezvous: the Mermaid Café, *the* place for expatriate Europeans, which I took to mean Intelligence Division Junior Staffers. I left messages on all available media. She came to the Mermaid Café as the trees were filling with migratory birds and the streets with Marrakech's loud, confident, beautiful young people. She wore black, with lots of silver.

"You do know, Ethan, that this place is so noncredible it's death to my street-cool to be seen even walking past?" The year and a half between Mermaid Café and San Francisco executive suite might never have existed. The tap behind her ear obliged with the Arabic for a bottle of wine. "Fucking muck, but I'll say this for them, they have the best jukebox in the city, if you're into unfettered schmaltz and masochistic nostalgia in strict 4/4 time." We tried both. She was right on both. We danced at pupil-dilation distance until the place filled up with drunk Finns roaring *Suooooomi!* at the tops of their voices. ("Proves my point, Eth"), whereupon she whirled me into the neon-and-laser-lit labyrinth of the old city ("I've got a mind-map hardjiggered into my medulla, otherwise I'd never find my way home at night") between the street-sleepers and the knife-sharp *jeunesse* in Italian leathers on fluorescent biopower Vespa mopeds ("I always envied my mother hitting puberty in the Swinging Sixties with all that monochrome and PVC; here, I think I can understand what it felt like") through corridors splattered with the still-dripping scars of spray-bomb rumbles between rival political/theological/artistic/philosophical/scientific groups ("Here, youth matters; they really believe they have the power to change the world, make it better, fairer, more civilized, more beautiful, more wild") past ranks of fast-food booths and stalls selling bootleg CDs and Dutch meatware and better-than-original ersatz Cartier accessories and Chanel smell ("What makes it so appealing, so exciting to a Euro stegosaur like me is that the media of expression haven't yet been usurped by accountants. The Almighty Ecu isn't the be-all and end-all; whatever your voice: music, poetry, flat-art, 3-D, time-base, VR, art-narcs, writing, drama, you can get heard") into the sweat and heat and firelight of the Square of Souls ("It's all

one big underground, Eth. Everybody's free. Come on and I'll show you this crazy-priest, some kind of sufi, he can look right into people's souls and slay them in the spirit; they just keel right over backward. Fucking amazing. When did you last see that down at the Pompidou Center, or Covent fucking Garden?"). And the fires burned and the jugglers juggled and the crazy-priests preached and slew men's souls while still in their bodies, but she did not sleep with me.

In the morning I went to destroy Al Haq. My contact was a member of the Islamic University Political Science department, into which Al Haq's cell structure was known to be linked. As an ex-pat, Dr. Prawal was wont to lunch daily at the same Bangladeshi restaurant; there I waited, at the farthest, darkest table, and watched him pick fastidiously at chick peas and *lobia* beans and tap his feet to Politically Correct Delta *dhangra*. I let him work his way through to coffee before sending him the note I had printed out in a cubicle in the men's toilet. It read: *Go to the red-haired man with the silk tie with Curtiss C3 biplanes on it*. Printed, of course, in Malkhut.

"Excuse me, do I know you?" They never understand why they do what the fracter makes them do. Some strange compulsion.

"You don't," I said, and pushed a second note across the table to him. The Malkhut Arabic read: *Tell me everything you know about Al Haq*. When he had finished, I thanked him civilly and with the Hokhmah, the Angel of Forgetting, took away everything after his departure from the Politics and Social Studies Unit that afternoon. Then I went to wait with the bad wine and the blue music in the Mermaid for Luka. That was the night she took me to the dog pit and in the blood and meat and shit and death I refused to see any analogy to what I had done in the name of political expediency to fifty people in as many countries.

Now that I had been given his name and face, I studied Mohammed Bedawi, Al Haq's instigator and leader, as closely as a red-haired man in a russet city may. On Friday he left the city in a red Séat Albeñiz and I followed in a hire-company Peugeot along dirt roads lined with billboards extolling Islamic Unity and advertising French *cañabarillos* through well-watered truck farms into the foothills of the Atlas. The road threw itself in loops and hairpin bends across the mountainsides. He stopped at a mountain village unchanged but for the satellite dishes, solar generators, and Toyota pickups in a thousand years. After exultantly greeting his family, he went

with the men to prayer while the women prepared a meal. A hologram of a local *sidi*, pale in the sharp mountain air, hovered above the square tower of the village mosque. A farmer I asked told me Bedawi came here to pray with his family every Friday. I thanked him, and took away his memory of ever having met a red-haired Euro.

Luka was waiting for me at the Mermaid Café.

“Something to show you,” she said and, taking my gloved hand in her gloved hand, whirled me off into the old city she loved so much. “Behold, *Purgatorio*,” she announced, and pushed me through the low wooden door into the room she had created. *Purgatorio*; where failure and inadequacy and guilt are burned away. It was harrowing. It was ecstatic. It was a long luxurious plunge into the heart of darkness. It was sex with angels. It was astonishing and horrifying and beautiful and monstrous and disgusting and sad and shocking and funny and sickening and it did not touch me. It could not touch me. Some failures and guilts lie too deep for purgation.

All that next week while I prepared the termination, I could not avoid the impression that Luka had made that small room-sized hell for me.

“I wish you could touch me,” she said one evening as we sat on wrought-iron chairs in the fern-filled courtyard garden of her house. Dressed in something black and sleeveless, she smoked Black Cats and practiced aromatic smoke-rings. “I want to feel your hands. I want your hands to feel me. Take off the gloves.”

“You know I can’t.” I borrowed a draw or two on her thin brown *cañabarrillo*. “It’s not safe.”

“Can’t. Won’t. You’ve always worn gloves. Emotional gloves. Touch not and be not touched. What are you so afraid of, Ethan?”

“I’m not afraid.”

Suddenly, she had taken my wrists in her hands.

“But you are, Ethan. Afraid, and cold.” Then she cried, honest, full tears. “I love you. You hurt me. What can I do? Nothing. There’s nothing I can do. It has to be you, Ethan. If you want. I’ll always be here, you’ll always be able to find me, but you have to choose.”

Did she know me so little that she had forgotten that with me it could never be either/or, but both/and?

Friday came. A trip to the main dealer had confirmed that full in-car office systems were standard on the Mark Six Séat Albeñiz Bedawi drove;



Marrakech directory inquiries obligingly supplied the car's e-mail code. Thus equipped, I drove the rented Peugeot to a pretty spot I had noticed the previous week on the other side of the valley from a particularly precipitous section of the mountain road. There I waited. I listened to New Wave *rai*. I ate a bag of prickly pears. When I saw the Mark Six Séat Albeñiz as a red dot in the ochre shatteredness of the Atlas, I fetched the portable fone-fax. As the red Séat started the hairpin ascent, I connected a pocket Olivetti/ICL Mark 88 bioprocessor to the modem. A gasoline truck-trailer combo came grinding down the steep grade. As the red Séat passed the booth where I had bought the prickly pears, I loaded the Sefirah disk and keyed in the fracter commit code. As the car rounded the curve before the very special drop, I called the number directory inquiries had given me, thumbed *transmit*, and rezzed Keter the Destroying Angel up on his onboard display. From my high place I watched the Mark Six Séat Albeñiz veer toward the oncoming tanker, slew back across the road, crash through the low, drystone wall, and fall with wonderful balletic slowness to detonate in a blossom of flame on the rocks and scrub of the shadowy valley floor. I watched the gas combo stop dead, the driver leap down and stare for a full minute before running down the road, gesticulating wildly, toward the prickly pear booth. On my return to Marrakech I booked a seat on a shuttle to Malaga, packed, paid, and left, without explanation, without a note, without one good-bye for Luka.

SOME DRAGONS ARE TOO large, weigh too heavily on the landscape to be slain, however deserving of death they may be. Europa, the she-dragon, sprawling across a continent with ski resorts in her mountainous spines, eyes hidden behind red glasses while she seeks virgin nations to lunch upon, is perhaps more deserving of dispatch than many others, but even my Keter hand could not deliver shock enough to burn out its huge, slow, many-brained nervous system. But this saint may perhaps break the chain that binds it to the dragon's finger.

In the courtyard garden: early bird song, in darkness dawning. *Hurry up now, it's time.* I lay down the scissors, take up my weapons, and go to meet my enemy.

A BICYCLE IS A friend in a way that an automobile can never be. A car can be a lover: sophisticated, complex, temperamental, but one wrong step and the affair is over. The bicycle is simple, undemanding, faithful, but as with any friendship, you must work at it, maintain it, repair it where necessary, spend time with it, get to know its character. I have come to love this green and purple Dirt Wolf MTB. We started strangers, newly introduced by Mas at the ferry terminal at Osaka, but through mutual misunderstandings—pulled muscles, stripped chains, skinned elbows, dented wheels—we have established a relationship. From the Tanazaki-ya to Tosa Securities headquarters is only fifteen kilometers through dull teleurbia but the pleasure of having a good machine between your thighs, responsive to your touch and need, is a transcendent joy. Following the instructions I pried out of the one akira capable of supplying them, I turn off the tree-lined avenue of Affluent Telecommuter Houses with Slightly Less Affluent Telecommuter Homes built in their gardens and Even Less Affluent Telecommuter Apartments built in *their* gardens ad infinitum onto the private lane and so come to the gates of Graceland. Cast-aluminum treble clefs surmounted by Spyball cameras and minded by ToSec cops in replica Mr. Nudie suits, even down to the Fender guitars embroidered on the lapels: what else can it be?

It is always dangerous when your enemy has a sense of humor. Ask Batman.

I ride up to the gates—the guards growl—dismount (stay there, good and faithful servant), and lift my naked right hand to the security cameras.

“Hi there.” It is not quite as nonchalant in Japanese as I would like it to be. “Let me in.” And the gates of Graceland open before me. I slap a peel-off/stick-on biodecay label over the camera lens, fracter side down. Binah the time-freezer will take care of whoever is on the monitors. The astonished guards reach for Fiuzzis in inside pockets. Too slow, beefboys. I rip the extruded fracter from the demon box hooked to my belt, slap it to my helmet. And disappear as their pieces come level with my heart. Lost Acres: 'Becca's Blind Spot fracter. Anything within a two-meter radius vanishes as the perception centers close up space around it. While they are still milling around like a duet for Laurel and Hardy sumo wrestlers, I pop

up and slap a couple of Binahs over their Ray Ban data shades. Frozen. Playing statues. A moment to cover my rear with a second Lost Acres on the back of my helmet, and I am ready to continue following the raked gravel drive between its dark banks of rhododendrons. The pairs of guards I encounter never stand a chance against an enemy that can step out of their blind spot and blast them into no-time with freeze fracters. Pray Lord Daishi they don't have extended sensory rigs on those shades of theirs; I'm as naked as Lady Godiva in infrared, and as vulnerable. The big fear is dogs like the ones I fought in the cane field. Lost Acres won't fool their noses and to use Keter as I did that time I'll have to step out of the blind spot.

I cut through the rhododendrons onto an expanse of beautifully striped lawn punctuated with twice-life-size busts of Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochrane, Chuck Berry, Patsy Kline, Little Richard, Bill Haley. Elvis. Rock'n'roll heaven. Gene-tweaked muntjak deer graze among the greats. Surreal, but at least dwarf deer preclude cybercanines. Beyond the lawn, a swath of yellow gravel, beyond the yellow gravel, an antebellum Scarlett O'Hara mansion. The only indication that I am still in Japan and not wet-dream Amerika is the ToSec thunder-eagle riding the portico.

I glimpsed a guitar-shaped pool around the side.

My activities have not gone unnoticed—I did not imagine I would gain the *sanctus sanctorum* unchallenged. Enforcers stand around on the gravel, automatics in hands, eyes fixed on the sky as if expecting an attack by Superman. Nothing for it but to screw my courage to the sticking point, make a fast, low, mad run across the noisy, treacherous gravel and hope to make it to the door before they empty their magazines into the sound of my footsteps. Go for it, Ethan, *go*...

They do not even turn. This is too easy. Suspiciously too easy. Inside Graceland, I slam and bolt the door and tear off my face of invisibility. I have a different weapon here: Gevurah, the destroying fear of God. As I move through the corridors like divine wrath, sending those I meet fleeing from me screaming in terror, I discover that Graceland is an enigma within a joke. The magnolias-and-mint-juleps exterior is a hollow shell of offices and access ways; within, glimpsed through windows and ventilators, is a mansion-sized space roofed with glass and walled with what I can only describe as three-story videowalls. Hundreds of televisions; thousands. On

the polished wood floor stand four Neo-Shinto torii gates, each facing a cardinal point. Between them is a shoji-walled tile-roofed Daishi Hall.

For the first time, my confidence—my arrogance—falters. Lord Daishi walk with me.

Do I imagine, or are the massed televisions filled with faces?

Too dangerous to leave lying around: I hold the Fear demon in the flame from my silver Zippo until it crisps and curls in death. Then I mount the steps to the door signed ADMINISTRATION AND ACCOUNTS.

“Good morning,” I announce to the assembled secretaries submanagers PAs account executives and two punky but cute kids in VR bodygloves. “Please don’t be afraid.” Not quite the smooth purr of James Mason in *The Wicked Lady*, but they look at me and I catch their spirits in my right hand. “The instructions I am about to download into your workstations are absolute and cannot be countermanded, is that clear?” Even the boys in the film-circuit suits bow. I’ve been looking forward to this since the idea came to me on the ride up from the Tanazaki-ya. “You will arrange to have every ToSec accountholder paid the equivalent of five years premiums. You will place all privately held stock in the company on the Pacific Rim market. You will then divide what is left among yourselves, leave the building as quickly as possible, and take a lengthy holiday.” The demon box says it all so much more eloquently in Fracter Kanji onscreen but every guy ought to have a chance to play Robin Hood riding through the glen once in his life. Steal from the rich, give to the poor? It may not be FX courtesy Industrial Light and Magic, but the humble tap dance of Qwerty keys that signals the true destruction, the economic dismemberment, of Tosa Securities. If I go now with my hands full of white heat it is purely personal.

Double doors open without command from me; I advance silently across the polished wood floor toward the heart of Graceland. Silently, the banked walls of television screens blizzard and fill with faces; men, women, old, young. Children. Westerners; Euros, Americans, not many. Among the faces, the odd blank screen swept by momentary flurries of images with the eye-wrenching flavor of fracters. The pillars of the torii gate are studded with soul-taps.

Tosa Securities’ dream of empire is created and upheld by the hands of the dead. Stolen souls. Enslaved memories. Dozens—hundreds, perhaps—

of expert systems to manage and monitor and administer and operate and observe. Tireless. Constant. Vigilant. Eternal. If the dead are its digits, its senses, who—what—is its guiding intelligence? The door to the Daishi Hall swings open. What else to do, but enter?

Hanging brass lamps illuminate the serene features of hundreds of Buddhist saints lining the walls; I recognize Kannon, Dainichi, Binzuru forever denied Buddhahood because of his fondness for strong drink. The place of the central image on the altar is occupied by what looks like a suit of antique armor with a television set for a head.

“Life imitates *anime*?” I say in English, advancing between the Boddhisattvas and Boddhidharmas. The suit of armor, I see now, is built onto the frame of a ubiquitous Dornier Industrial Robot, identical to Luka’s familiar, Oddjob, that guided us through the Californian undersoul. I close until I can see my face reflected whole in the blank television screen beneath the swooping winged helmet. “Not so very far away there are people eating their breakfast and watching the early news.”

The blade is a terrifying blur of silver; a steel wind in my face; held poised, still, ready to strike, as my left hand is poised, still, ready.

“It could as easily have been your head, Mr. Ring.” English. Received Pronunciation. Idiomatic. Perfect as only the top-line taps can be.

I begin to understand. I begin to be very afraid.

“It could as easily have been yours.” I close my left hand.

“Somehow I doubt it, Mr. Ring.”

Like an old Ray Harryhausen animation, the samurai-machine steps down from the altar, needle feet clicking, clicking on the wooden floor. Two of its four arms terminate in short, sharp blades. Childhood nightmares: television memories of spidercrabs dredged up from the floor of the Sea of Japan, five meters of clicking, chitinous, spindly armor. Fighting primal revulsion, I give ground.

“All done with computers, isn’t it?” I shout to the Boddhisattvas and Boddhidharmas, to the massed personas in their television screens. To anything that will hear. “How did you die?”

“Cancer, Mr. Ring. Of course. Some say that the fact that it forewarns you is a grace, a time to square yourself with the Buddha or your ancestors or Allah and find dignity. Not me, Mr. Ring. But then I’ve always been an exception to the common rules. I found anger instead; anger that the body I

had trained rigorously to obey my will should so fatally betray me; anger that my ambition, my work, should become the ambition and work of others less able than I. Anger.

“The death itself was quite painless. My soul-tap was downloaded into the simulator, my children and employees were suitably mournful, I became a simulacrum, an animated memory. Then the strange thing occurred, Mr. Ring, that I cannot properly explain to you, or anyone, because it involves the very unexplainability of self and otherness. I came back to life. I became more than recorded memories, passive, dead. I became aware, Mr. Ring, I became sentient, active, alive. I like to imagine it was my anger, the strength of my indignation that would not die and was reincarnated in the machine. Certainly, it was anger and the acquisitive urge that inspired me to build my company that led me to raid those other simulacra with whom I shared the simulator, and subjugate them, and mold them into tools, weapons, with which I could wrest control of the company away from my heirs. Their dismay when they found that the systems would not obey them, when they saw my face on their monitors!”

Another few steps across the wooden floor.

“Every nation has a date, Mr. Ring, a place, a time when everyone remembers exactly what they were doing, because it is the exact moment of cultural synthesis. With you it is the death of Elvis Presley, the destruction of the *Challenger*. With us it is the early morning light over Hiroshima. I saw that light, Mr. Ring. I saw the back rain of the dust and ashes of Empire. And I saw that Empire rebuild herself, proudly shake off American paternalism, take on that Empire, defeat it. If now we have passed from center stage to the lesser roles, I have no regret; the bit players may yet outperform the headline stars.”

This house; this cultural schizophrenia; this Neo-Imperial adventure: I understand. Behind the white-painted geisha mask, the soul lies unchanged, unchanging, unchangeable.

“And now you’re taking up the sword of Mishima.”

“It requires a special nobility to disembowel yourself on a hotel balcony, but Mishima was an idealist, and idealists are fools. We Takedas are pragmatists: I merely want what was always mine to begin with; my lands, my respect, my name.”

“If it had been for the soul of Japan, I could have understood,” I say.  
“But you’re just one more fucking little *daimyo*.”

“Who wants, and will have, your head, Mr. Ring.”

The blade moves. This time I am ready. My right hand is held up before me.

“I don’t think so, Mr. Takeda.”

“*Lord* Takeda, if you please. And, as I have said before, I do think so.”

The arc of the cut passes so close, my reflex recoil so slow, that I feel the kiss of the steel across my throat. The samurai-robot clicks into combat stance; one blade raised high, the other drawn back for the killing thrust.

*Blood* warm on my fingers. I stare at my right hand disbelievingly.

Impossible. Impossible. *Impossible*.

Left hand. Chaos hand. Death hand. The backs of my knuckles are pressed against my face. *Die, you diseased fuck.*

“It is written, Mr. Ring, that the way of victory lies in *becoming your enemy*,” says the cultured BBC accent. He speaks? He sees Keter and lives? How? *How?* I hardly hear his words for the blood surging red in my brain. “I know you, Mr. Ring. Do you think your European masters would have let their most valuable, most powerful weapon go cycling gaily over hill and dale unchaperoned?”

“They had you watch me?”

“We were contacted by the European embassy while you were still shopping for bicycles in Tokyo with your animator friend. Since you stamped your albums at Temple One, ours has been the unseen presence accompanying you on your pilgrimage. We Two, Pilgrims Together. You did manage to evade us at Tokushima but we caught up with you again at Temple Nineteen and put up the Hiyasa checkpoint to lock on. I am still not certain whether it was unfortunate or serendipitous that you left the Approved Tourist Route at Aki. If you hadn’t, you might never have encountered the dog patrol and I would never have seen exactly why your European masters value you so highly.”

Those dead televisions, those semi-fracters blizzarded with interference. Someone had been monitoring those dogs, as I had suspected, but no one living.

“Had I been observing you through purely visual channels, my persona would be as hopelessly disrupted as your other victims. But I am hunting



you with subtler senses—infrared, sound, motion sensors...”

“My head does not come easily, Mr. Takeda.” Europeans too can read the masters. *Strike in an unexpected manner*, writes Miyamoto Musashi. Robot limbs are strong but the muscle joints are fragile. Do my enemy’s sensors register a warp of heat, a flicker of digits as I dart between the splayed legs, wrench down the upraised blade arm, break its joint across my knee, and, as the second blade comes blurring toward me, cleave it cleanly at the first joint with the stolen sword?

More things than tourist-talk Japanese in my plastic socket.

“It is a mistake to rely on only one weapon,” I quote, gasping, heart hammering.

“Quite,” says the Takeda-thing. “But you are not the only one who can play the Scissor-Paper-Stone Game.” The faceless television opens its single eye. It is only because I once saw its face and survived that the Keter fracter does not cinder my eyes in my head. Even the split second of recognition and reaction is like lightning earthing down my spine. What? Where? Feel. Feel. Wooden floor. Closed. Keep your eyes closed. Feel. My quivering fingers touch the carved foot of a wooden Boddhisattva. I hear clicking, mincing footsteps. My enemy, closing to destroy me. But the battle is more than Ethan Ring’s personal nemesis now. A ToSec in possession of the passwords and commands recorded on the soul-tap wired into my skull and loose in the world with the fracters in its hands: there is no imagining how this drama of history will end.

“I can see you, Mr. Ring. Can you see me?”

You cannot afford one glance; for if you have just handed it Malkhut the Obedience fracter... Keter you might survive through familiarity, but an unrefusable order to slit your own stomach...

Movement sensors. Infrared. And, in my belt pouch, the can of spray lubricant I used on that troublesome gearshift... I check with my fingers for my cigarette lighter. Work, fingers, fuck you, work. Get that top off. Christ, I can hear it, stepping across the floor. Get away, you bastard, get away. I feel my way along the Buddhas. *Forgive me, Lord Daishi*. The oil spray ignites into a gout of fire; I wave my improvised flamethrower over the wooden images, sending the Buddhas up in a roar of enlightenment I can no longer hear the sure click, step of the Takeda-robot. In the shelter of my

arms, I snuff out my fire, spray thick, black oil over my wraparound MTB shades.

“Right, you bastard.”

Fools, fighting in a burning house...

“Impressive, Mr. Ring.”

The voice, too close, too near... Multijointed fingers clamp around my throat, squeeze blood from the hairline wound, push me back toward the blazing Buddhas. I hammer with the base of my spray can, but robot fingers lock onto my glasses; lift them. My one free hand sprays pure blackness into the place I hope the screen to be. Plastic fingers spasm; I snap joints like crab legs, wriggle free. Do I, dare I, dare I, do I? One glance. I dare. I do.

The spray has blacked out the left side of the winged helmet and three quarters of the glowing screen. *Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo!* I must act quickly, decisively, before Takeda reformats the fracter into a smaller screen.

One glance can contain the key to victory. On the rear of the carapace, exactly where I remember Luka had plugged the multiplex link transmitter into her Oddjob, is a fifteen-pin socket, standard issue on the Dornier Mark 15.

The Takeda-thing spins on its legs, hunting for a true image in the blur of infrared distractions but I am faster. In the instant before its motion sensors register, I am on top of it. The Daishi Hall is a hell of blazing Boddhisattvas and Boddhidharmas, but the demon box is off my belt, its adaptor pushed into the socket where the Takeda-thing cannot reach.

“You wanted the fracters,” I shout over the roar of burning, the scream of fire alarms. “Then have them.”

I press the DUMP DISK key.

COMMIT CODE? asks the demon box.

My fingers, numbs from Keter-shock, miskey. A crushing agony in the back of my neck; robot fingers trying to tear head and spine from my body.

WHAT I TELL...

The other hand is spidering on broken fingers around the base of my skull, feeling, questing, feeling...

WHAT I TELL YOU THREE...

A chitinous finger screws, screws into the plastic vulva of my taphead socket The pain is delirious, but nothing to what it will be if Lord Takeda succeeds in firing a macrovolt charge through my cerebellum.

WHAT I TELL YOU THREE TIMES...

I am burning. I am dying.

IS...

He is scraping out the inside of my skull, sucking down my soul, swallowing me.

TRUE.

COMPLETE FRACTER SYSTEM DOWNLOAD EFFECTED says the demon box. And in the same instant, Lord Takeda's grip on my soul is released. Pain ceases, I roll clear. By the light of a hundred burning Buddhas, I see the Takeda-thing, legs locked into a pyramid, arms out at its sides, rigid, while Marcus's Sefirah disk pours all the fear and all the joy and all the pain and all the annihilation and all the madness and all the healing and all the holiness and all the remembering and all the forgetting and all the highs and lows and peace and loathing and death in all the world through him.

"Burn in hell, you bastard!"

The pillars are alight, flames are running along the roof beams and trusses. The shoji walls have already gone. I have only moments before the roof comes down, but there are two last things to be burned in this fire ceremony. The heat and smoke force me down to crawl, choking, skin seared, across the floor to the fallen image of Kokuzo.

Once, Luka had videoed a young street preacher who used a large paschal candle as an allegory of hell. "One thousand ecus to anyone who will hold his finger in the flame for one minute!" he would harangue the Saturday shoppers. "One minute? No takers? How can you then contemplate an eternity of burning in hell!"

But some things must be contemplated. Some hells must be embraced. I press my hands to the glowing wood. The pain blows away every thought, everything except the need to stop it, stop it, stop it. But I cannot. I cannot. *Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo*. Hold them. I watch my hands blacken, *hold them* and split, *hold them* and smoke, and burn, and crisp to obscene scraps of charred gristle. *Hold them*. I hold them until very trace and line of

the things that were engraved there are burned away. Only then, transfigured with pain, do I run from the Daishi Hall as the roof falls in a gout of flame on the blazing, melting Takeda-thing, run out between the smoking torii gates beneath the glass roof of the hollow Graceland that cracks in the sudden uprush of heat and shatters into dozens of tessellated Fuller-hexagons, all falling down, all drifting down, all coming down, raining down on me.

THE LEGEND ATTACHED TO the small, un-numbered *bangai* a morning's walk through beautiful country beyond Temple Twenty-seven is one of the most unusual of the whole pilgrimage. As the Daishi was passing through this part of Shikoku he met a trader leading a packhorse laden with dried salt trout. Kobo Daishi asked for the gift of one fish but years of sin had hardened the fish trader's heart, and not even sparing the smallest and least fish, he urged his horse on. Immediately, it was struck with paralyzing colic and the man, remembering he had heard that a great holy man was abroad on the island, went back to beg the Daishi's forgiveness. The Daishi handed the trader his begging bowl and told him to fill it with water from a nearby spring and give it to the horse. This he did, and the horse was at once restored. In gratitude, the trader offered the Daishi all his load of fish but the saint would accept only one, the smallest and least, which he put into the spring, prayed, and immediately, it was returned to life. The fish trader built a hermitage by that spring, which over the centuries has become this Buddhist Temple. Fish still swim in the pool fed from the spring; the monks are keen to show visitors the marks behind their heads, on either side of their backs, and on the tails that are the prints of the Daishi's fingers.

On their instructions, I am to bathe my hands twice a day—dawn and sunset—in the restoring waters. I cannot say I have felt any great blessing, perhaps what benefit there is exists in the physical exercise of walking down to the pool and the spiritual grace of watching slow creatures in deep, clear liquid. Whatever, my nurse assures me that when I do go to bathe, the bioassay lines on the robot that follows me like a bad conscience dip into smoother, more tranquil configurations.

They are a kind and true people, this reclusive brotherhood of homosexual monks. They live the spiritual life with the natural, liquid grace of a trout in water. Few things are more attractive than natural saintliness, few things rarer to find. Many of them are men who have stepped away from the professional world but feel that their sexual orientation precludes them from the regular spiritual orders; the Trout Brook Temple brothers are renowned among the few who know of their existence as strong gentle healers, razor-sharp accountants, and fearsome lawyers. After Mas found me in the chaos and destruction of Graceland and brought me back to the

Tanazaki-ya, the Tanazakis sent for the brothers of Salt Trout Temple, knowing that they possessed both the power to save me and keep me hidden from those who might be interested in the man who single-handedly destroyed Tosa Securities Incorporated. Like all men of spiritual integrity, the brothers have little interest in the processes of history.

While the major players in Japan's unfolding act of kabuki manipulate and maneuver in the vacuum left by the sudden collapse of ToSecInc, I become acquainted with my new hands. The plastic skin is a little disconcerting, especially its shocking, terminal junction with the pale, freckled Ethan-skin of my wrists but Brother Saigyo, my loving nurse, gives me daily assurances that beneath the stiff, clawlike carapaces, new skin is growing, thickening, laying down layer upon layer, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. Pigment, hair, nails, fingerprints, all will be exactly as before thanks to the miracle of accelerated regeneration.

"I hope not," I say but I have never yet, and never will, let Brother Saigyo into my little joke. I hope not; I think not. When the medical robot unseals these plastic shells and I dip them into the Daishi's water, the sight of them may run slivers of neurasthenic shock into my brain, but they feel good, they feel clean.

"Visitor for you," says Brother Saigyo, grinning impishly. I am not surprised, I have been expecting this visit since I came out of anesthesia in a blissful high of pain and remembered what Mas had said that night in the Tanazaki-ya. "Will you go down, or shall I send her up?"

"Send her up," I say, comfortable, secure with my beer, newspapers, diskperson, and robot familiar on the pilgrim hostel veranda. I watch the way she moves up the flagged path through the funeral plinths, brushing the stones with her hands, past the sub-chapels, feeling the soft stroke of pine needles through her fingers, the unconscious sensuality of everything she ever did, her unfettered spontaneity, and it is like a nail in my heart. She mounts the veranda steps, one, two, three, four, surveys my empty beer cans, newspapers, disks, robot.

"Well, you got a long way, didn't you?"

Black skirt, long, fringed, and a-jingle with Indian bells; black Docs; black sleeveless poloneck. Much silver. That ludicrous crest of black hair she could never keep out of her eyes.

“You get as far as the Daishi permits you,” I say. “This far, this pilgrimage, I only have grace enough for twenty-seven and a half temples.”

We embrace; she wraps her long skinny bare arms with their jangling silver bangles around me; I feel the quick shiver of bare emotion. I do some sort of half hug, all forearms and elbows, strangely reluctant to touch her with my plastic hands.

“How are they, Eth?” I show her. She looks disgusted.

“Jesus, Eth. I told Mas I’d foot the bill. I mean, make the appropriate contribution to temple funds. They’re sharp boys, these monks. Mas won’t hear of it, he says he makes five times what I do and will never miss it, which is probably true, but I’m going to do it anyway.”

“They’ll be as good as they were before,” I say. “Almost.” Then: “They’re gone, Luka. That was why I did it. It was the only way to get rid of them. Burn them out.”

“It was always heroes and angels with you, wasn’t it, Eth?” She leans back against the veranda rail, stretches her arms as far as they will go to either side along the knotted wood.

“The disk is gone too, Luka. It burned in the fire. All gone. The fracters, Marcus’s dream, burned.”

“Mas says when he found you you were muttering something over and over and over.”

“What?”

“ ‘I’m sorry, Marcus; I’m sorry, Marcus.’ Over and over and over.”

“Luka.”

She smiles out at me from underneath that ludicrous hair.

“I’m free. I died in the fire with the Takeda simulacrum. Ethan Ring does not exist anymore. A closed file in a gray office in Ghent.”

“Shit, Ethan, I don’t want to run all my life. I’ve got better things to do...”

“You won’t, Luka. I’m sure of it. Without the fracters, they have no use for me.”

“Well, if they change their minds and decide they want you back after all, they’ll have to come through me.” She looks over her shoulder at the temple garden. “I’m fucking starving, Eth. I’ve been on the go since before breakfast. You know, Mas wouldn’t tell me where you were? I had to meet

him in Yawatahama and let him bring me here. *Mondo secreto*. What did you do? The whole country is going mad out there.”

“I’m pretty much out of the world here,” I say. “Thankfully. I can get you something to eat but they’re pretty strict interpretation Buddhist diet-wise. Vegetables, no grains.”

“Suits me.”

“Eat what I eat.”

“Become you.”

“Is that what you want?”

For the first time we dare eye contact.

“Yes it is. Yes.”

She pulls me to her, runs her tongue over my red-stubbed scalp.

“That fabulous, fabulous hair,” she mourns; then, intimate, in my ear, sly: “How are they about other things?”

“To the brothers, it’s a spiritual grace. As long as there’s love in it.”

“I think that could be arranged.”

She takes my destroyed hands in her hands, lifts her arms high, opens them wide.

“They’re gone, Luka. They won’t come back. But sometimes, if the light is right, in the early morning, or at sunset, I think I can see something written there, under the plastic.”

She freezes, every muscle prepared for a final, killing act of betrayal. In the same instant she chooses to trust me.

“What do they say, Ethan?”

“ ‘Emon Saburo Reborn.’ ”

“And are you going to tell me what that means?” Our hands come together at the bottom of the circle of air.

“Some year, Luka, some year.”



# The Tear

Ian McDonald

Ptey, sailing

ON THE NIGHT THAT PTEY voyaged out to have his soul shattered, eight hundred stars set sail across the sky. It was an evening at Great Winter's ending. The sunlit hours raced toward High Summer, each day lavishly more full of light than the one before. In this latitude, the sun hardly set at all after the spring equinox, rolling along the horizon, fat and idle and pleased with itself. Summer-born Ptey turned his face to the sun as it dipped briefly beneath the horizon, closed his eyes, enjoyed its lingering warmth on his eyelids, in the angle of his cheekbones, on his lips. To the Summer-born, any loss of the light was a reminder of the terrible, sad months of winter and the unbroken, encircling dark.

But we have the stars, his father said, a Winter-born. We are born looking out into the universe.

Ptey's father commanded the little machines that ran the catamaran, trimming sail, winding sheets, setting course by the tumble of satellites; but the tiller he held himself. The equinoctial gales had spun away to the west two weeks before and the catboat ran fast and fresh on a sweet wind across the darkening water. Twins hulls cut through the ripple-reflections of gas-flares from the Temejveri oil platforms. As the sun slipped beneath the huge dark horizon and the warmth fell from the hollows of Ptey's face, so his father turned his face to the sky. Tonight, he wore his Steris Aspect. The ritual selves scared Ptey, so rarely were they unfurled in Ctarisphay: births, namings, betrothals and marriages, divorces and deaths. And of course, the Manifoldings. Familiar faces became distant and formal. Their language changed, their bodies seemed slower, heavier. They became possessed by

strange, special knowledges. Only Steris possessed the language for the robots to sail the catamaran and, despite the wheel of positioning satellites around tilted Tay, the latitude and longitude of the Manifold House. The catamaran itself was only run out from its boathouse, to strong songs heavy with clashing harmonies, when a child from Ctarisphay on the edge of adulthood sailed out beyond the outer mole and the fleet of oil platforms to have his or her personality unfolded into eight.

Only two months since, Cjatay had sailed out into the oily black of a late winter afternoon. Ptey was Summer-born, a Solstice boy; Cjatay a late Autumn. It was considered remarkable that they shared enough in common to be able to speak to each other, let alone become the howling boys of the neighborhood, the source of every broken window and borrowed boat. The best part of three seasons between them, but here was only two moons later, leaving behind the pulsing gas flares and maze of pipe work of the sheltering oil fields, heading into the great, gentle oceanic glow of the plankton blooms, steering by the stars, the occupied, haunted stars. The Manifolding was never a thing of moons and calendars, but of mothers' watchings and grandmothers' knowings and teachers' notings and fathers' murmurings, of subtly shifted razors and untimely lethargies, of deep-swinging voices and stained bedsheets.

On Etjay Quay, where the porcelain houses leaned over the landing, Ptey had thrown his friend's bag down into the boat. Cjatay's father had caught it and frowned. There were observances. Ways. Forms.

"See you," Ptey had said.

"See you." Then the wind caught in the catamaran's tall, curved sails and carried it away from the rain-wet, shiny faces of the houses of Ctarisphay. Ptey had watched the boat until it was lost in the light dapple of the city's lamps on the winter-dark water. See Cjatay he would, after his six months on the Manifold House. But only partially. There would be Cjatays he had never known, never even met. Eight of them, and the Cjatay with whom he had stayed out all the brief Low Summer nights of the prith run on the fishing staithes, skinny as the piers' wooden legs silhouetted against the huge sun kissing the edge of the world, would be but a part, a dream of one of the new names and new personalities. Would he know him when he met him on the great floating university that was the Manifold House?

Would he know himself?

“Are they moving yet?” Steris called from the tiller. Ptey shielded his dark-accustomed eyes against the pervasive glow of the carbon-absorbing plankton blooms and peered into the sky. *Sail of Bright Anticipation* cut two lines of liquid black through the gently undulating sheet of biolight, fraying at the edges into fractal curls of luminescence as the sheets of microorganisms sought each other.

“Nothing yet.”

But it would be soon, and it would be tremendous. Eight hundred stars setting out across the night. Through the changes and domestic rituals of his sudden Manifolding, Ptey had been aware of sky-watch parties being arranged, stargazing groups setting up telescopes along the quays and in the campaniles, while day by day, the story moved closer to the head of the news. Half the world—that half of the world not blinded by its extravagant axial tilt—would be looking to the sky. Watching Steris rig *Sail of Bright Anticipation*, Ptey had felt cheated, like a sick child confined to bed while festival raged across the boats lashed beneath his window. Now, as the swell of the deep dark of his world’s girdling ocean lifted the twin prows of *Sail of Bright Anticipation*, on his web of shock-plastic mesh ahead of the mast, Ptey felt his excitement lift with it. A carpet of lights below, a sky of stars above: all his alone.

They were not stars. They were the eight hundred twenty six space habitats of the Anpreen Commonweal, spheres of nano-carbon ice and water three hundred kilometers in diameter that for twice Ptey’s lifetime had adorned Bephis, the ringed gas giant, like a necklace of pearls hidden in a velvet bag, far from eye and mind. The negotiations fell into eras. The Panic, when the world of Tay became aware that the gravity waves pulsing through the huge ripple tank that was their oceanbound planet were the bow-shocks of massive artifacts decelerating from near light-speed. The Denial, when Tay’s governments decided it was Best Really to try and hide the fact that their solar system had been immigrated into by eight hundred and some space vehicles, each larger than Tay’s petty moons, falling into neat and proper order around Bephis. The Soliciting, when it became obvious that Denial was futile—but on our terms, our terms. A fleet of space probes was dispatched to survey and attempt radio contact with the arrivals—as yet silent as ice. And, when they were not blasted from space or vaporized or collapsed into quantum black holes or any of the plethora of

fanciful destructions imagined in the popular media, the Overture. The Sobering, when it was realized that these star-visitors existed primarily as swarms of free-swimming nano-assemblers in the freefall spherical oceans of their eight hundred and some habitats, one mind with many forms; and, for the Anpreen, the surprise that these archaic hominiforms on this backwater planet were many selves within one body. One thing they shared and understood well. Water. It ran through their histories, it flowed around their ecologies, it mediated their molecules. After one hundred twelve years of near-light-speed flight, the Anpreen Commonwealth was desperately short of water; their spherical oceans shriveled almost into zero gravity teardrops within the immense, nano tech-reinforced ice shells. Then began the era of Negotiation, the most prolonged of the phases of contact, and the most complex. It had taken three years to establish the philosophical foundations: the Anpreen, an ancient species of the great Clade, had long been a colonial mind, arranged in subtle hierarchies of self-knowledge and ability, and did not know who to talk to, whom to ask for a decision, in a political system with as many governments and nations as there were islands and archipelagos scattered across the world ocean of the fourth planet from the sun.

Now the era of Negotiation had become the era of Open Trade. The Anpreen habitats spent their last drops of reaction mass to break orbit around Bephis and move the Commonwealth in-system. Their destination was not Tay, but Tejaphay, Tay's sunward neighbor, a huge waterworld of unbroken ocean one hundred kilometers deep, crushing gravity, and endless storms. A billion years before the seed-ships probed the remote star system, the gravitational interplay of giant worlds had sent the least of their number spiraling sunward. Solar wind had stripped away its huge atmosphere and melted its mantle of water ice into a planetary ocean, deep and dark as nightmares. It was that wink of water in the system-scale interferometers of the Can-Bet-Merey people, half a million years before, that had inspired them to fill their night sky with solar sails as one hundred thousand slow seed-ships rode out on flickering launch lasers toward the new system. An evangelically pro-life people were the Can-Bet-Merey, zealous for the Clade's implicit dogma that intelligence was the only force in the universe capable of defeating the physical death of space-time.

If the tens of thousands of biological packages they had rained into the world-ocean of Tejaphay had germinated life, Tay's probes had yet to discover it. The Can-Bet-Merey did strike roots in the afterthought, that little blue pearl next out from the sun, a tear spun from huge Tejaphay.

One hundred thousand years ago, the Can-Bet-Merey had entered the post-biological phase of intelligence and moved to that level that could no longer communicate with the biological life of Tay, or even the Anpreen.

"Can you see anything yet?" A call from the tiller. *Sail of Bright Anticipation* had left behind the carbon-soaked plankton bloom, the ocean was deep dark and boundless. Sky and sea blurred; stars became confused with the riding lights of ships close on the horizon.

"Is it time?" Ptey called back.

"Five minutes ago."

Ptey found a footing on the webbing, and, one hand wrapped in the sheets, stood up to scan the huge sky. Every child of Tay, crazily tilted at forty-eight degrees to the ecliptic, grew up conscious that her planet was a ball rolling around the sun and that the stars were far, vast and slow, almost unchanging. But stars could change; Bephis, that soft smudge of light low in the southeast, blurred by the glow of a eight hundred moon-sized space habitats, would soon be once again the hard point of light by which his ancestors had steered to their Manifoldings.

"Give it time," Ptey shouted. Time. The Anpreen were already voyaging; had switched on their drives and pulled out of orbit almost an hour before. The slow light of their embarkation had still not reached Tay. He saw the numbers spinning around in his head, accelerations, vectors, space and time all arranged around him like fluttering carnival banners. It had taken Ptey a long time to understand that not everyone could see numbers like him and reach out and make them do what they wanted.

"Well, I'll be watching the football," Cjatay had declared when Teacher Deu had declared a Special Class Project in conjunction with the Noble Observatory of Pteu to celebrate the Anpreen migration. "We're all jumping up and down, Anpreen this, Anpreen that, but when it comes down to it, they aliens and we don't know what they really want, no one does."

"They're not aliens," Ptey had hissed back. "There are no aliens, don't you know that? We're all just part of the one big Clade."

Then Teacher Deu had shouted at them quiet you boys and they had straightened themselves at their kneeling-desks, but Cjatay had hissed, “So if they’re our cousins, why don’t they give us their star-crosser drive?”

Such was the friendship between Ptey and Cjatay that they would argue over nodes of free-swimming nanotechnology orbiting a gas giant.

“Look! Oh look!”

Slowly, very slowly, Bephis was unraveling into a glowing smudge, like one of the swarms of nuchpas that hung above the waves like smoke on High Summer mornings. The fleet was moving. Eight hundred worlds. The numbers in his skull told Ptey that the Anpreen Commonweal was already at ten percent of lightspeed. He tried to work out the relativistic deformations of space-time but there were too many numbers flocking around him too fast. Instead, he watched Bephis unfurl into a galaxy, that cloud of stars slowly pull away from the bright mote of the gas giant. Crossing the ocean of night. Ptey glanced behind him. In the big dark, his father’s face was hard to read, especially as Steris, who was sober and focused, and, Ptey had learned, not particularly bright. He seemed to be smiling.

It is a deep understanding, the realization that you are cleverer than your parents, Ptey thought. Behind that first smirking, satisfied sense of your own smartness comes a more profound understanding; that smart is only smart at some things, in some situations. Clever is conditional: Ptey could calculate the space-time distortion of eight hundred space habitats, plot a course across the dark, steepening sea by the stars in their courses, but he could never harness the winds or whistle the small commands to the machines, all the weather-clevernesses of Steris. That is how our world has shaped our intelligences. A self for every season.

The ravel of stars was unwinding, the Anpreen migration flowing into a ribbon of sparkles, a scarf of night beyond the veils of the aurora. Tomorrow night, it would adorn Tejaphay, that great blue guide star on the edge of the world, that had become a glowing smudge, a thumbprint of the alien. Tomorrow night, Ptey would look at that blue eye in the sky from the minarets of the Manifold House. He knew that it had minarets; every child knew what the Manifold House and its sister houses all around the world, looked like. Great hulks of grey wood gone silvery from salt and sun, built over upon through within alongside until they were floating cities. Cities of

children. But the popular imaginations of Teacher Deu's Grade Eight class never painted them bright and loud with voices; they were dark, sooty labyrinths sailing under a perpetual cloud of black diesel smoke that poured from a thousand chimneys, taller even than the masts and towers. The images were sharp in Ptey's mind, but he could never see himself there, in those winding wooden staircases loud with the cries of sea birds, looking out from the high balconies across the glowing sea. Then his breath caught. All his imaginings and failures to imagine were made true as lights disentangled themselves from the skein of stars of the Anpreen migration: red and green stars, the riding lights of the Manifold House. Now he could feel the thrum of its engines and generators through the water and the twin hulls. Ptey set his hand to the carbon nanofiber mast. It sang to deep harmonic. And just as the stars are always further than you think, so Prey saw that the lights of the Manifold House were closer than he thought, that he was right under them, that *Sail of Bright Anticipation* was slipping through the outer buoys and nets, and that the towers and spires and minarets, rising in his vision, one by one, were obliterating the stars.

### Nejben, swimming

BENEATH A SKY OF HONEY, Nejben stood hip deep in water warm as blood, deep as forgetting. This High Summer midnight, the sun was still clear from the horizon, and in its constant heat and light, the wood of the Manifold House's old, warped spires seemed to exhale a spicy musk, the distilled pheromone of centuries of teenage hormones and sexual angsts and identity crises. In cupped hands, Nejben scooped up the waters of the Chalybeate Pool and let them run, gold and thick, through his fingers. He savored the sensuality, observed the flash of sunlight through the falling water, noted the cool, deep splash as the pool received its own. A new Aspect, Nejben; old in observation and knowledge, for the body remained the same though a flock of selves came to roost in it, fresh in interpretation and experience.

When Nejben first emerged, shivering and anoxic, from the Chalybeate Pool, to be wrapped in silvery thermal sheets by the agisters, he had feared himself mad. A voice in his head, that would not go away, that would not be shut up, that seemed to know him, know every part of him.

“It’s perfectly normal,” said agister Ashbey, a plump, serious woman with the blackest skin Nejben had ever seen. But he remembered that every Ritual Aspect was serious, and in the Manifold House the agisters were never in any other Aspect. None that the novices would ever see. “Perfectly natural. It takes time for your Prior, your childhood Aspect, to find its place and relinquish the control of the higher cognitive levels. Give it time. Talk to him. Reassure him. He will feel very lost, very alone, like he has lost everything that he ever knew. Except you, Nejben.”

The time-free, sun-filled days in the sunny, smoggy yards and cloisters of the First Novitiate were full of whisperings; boys and girls like himself whispering goodbye to their childhoods. Nejben learned his Prior’s dreads, that the self that had been called Ptey feared that the numbers, the patterns between them, the ability to reduce physical objects to mathematics and see in an instant their relationships and implications, would be utterly lost. He saw also that Nejben in himself scared Ptey: the easy physicality, the unselfconscious interest in his own body, the awareness of the hormones pumping like tidewater through his tubes and cells; the ever-present, ever-tickling nag of sex; everywhere, everywhen, everyone and thing. Even as a child-self, even as shadow, Ptey knew that the first self to be birthed at the Manifold House was the pubescent self, the sexual self, but he felt this growing, aching youth to be more alien than the disembodied, mathematical Anpreen.

The tiers led down into the palp pool. In its depths, translucencies shifted. Nejben shivered in the warm High Summer midnight.

“Hey! Ptey!”

Names flocked around the Manifold House’s towers like sun-gulls. New selves, new identities unfolded every hour of every day and yet old names clung. Agister Ashbey, jokey and astute, taught the social subtleties by which adults knew what Aspect and name to address and which Aspect and name of their own to wear in response. From the shade of the Poljeri Cloister, Puzhay waved. Ptey had found girls frightening, but Nejben liked them, enjoyed their company and the little games of admiring insult and flirting mock-animosity he played with them. He reckoned he understood girls now. Puzhay was small, still boy-figured, her skin Winterborn-pale, a Janni from Bedenderay, where at midwinter the atmosphere froze. She had a barbarous accent and continental manners, but Nejben found himself



thinking often about her small, flat boy-breasts with their big, thumbable nipples. He had never thought when he came to the Manifold House that there would be people here from places other than Ctarisphay and its archipelago sisters. People—girls—from the big polar continent. Rude girls who cursed and openly called boys names.

“Puzhay! What’re you doing?”

“Going in.”

“For the palps?”

“Nah. Just going in.”

Nejben found and enjoyed a sudden, swift swelling of his dick as he watched Puzhay’s breasts tauten as she raised her arms above her head and dived, awkward as a Bedenderay land-girl, into the water. Water hid it. Sun dapple kept it secret. He felt a shiver run over him and he dived down, deep down. Almost he let the air rush out of him in a gasp as he felt the cool cool water close around his body; then he saw Puzhay in her tight swim-shorts that made her ass look so strong and muscley turn in the water, tiny bubbles leaking from her nose, to grin and wave and beckon him down. Nejben swam down past the descending tiers of steps. Green opened before him, the bottomless emerald beyond the anti-skray nets where the Chalybeate pond was refreshed by the borderless sea. Between her pale red body and the deep green sea were the shimmering curtains of the palps.

*They did not make them we did not bring them they were here forever.* Ten thousand years of theology, biology, and xenology in that simple kinder-group rhyme. Nejben—all his people—had always known their special place; stranger to this world, spurted into the womb of the world-sea as the star-sperm, the seed of sentience. Twenty million drops of life-seed swam ashore and became humanity, the rest swam out to sea and met and smelled and loved the palps, older than forever. Now Nejben turned and twisted like an eel past funny, flirting, heartbreaking Puzhay, turning to show the merest glimpse of his own sperm-eel, down toward the palps. The curtain of living jelly rippled and dissolved into their separate lives. Slick, cold, quivering jelly slid across his sex-warm flesh. Nejben shivered, quivered; repelled yet aroused in a way that was other than sex. The water took on a prickle, a tickle, a tang of salt and fear and ancient ancient lusts, deep as his first stiff dream. Against sense, against reason, against three million years of species wisdom, Nejben employed the tricks of agister

Ashbey and opened his mouth. He inhaled. Once he gagged, twice he choked, then he felt the jellied eeling of the palps squirm down his throat: a choke, and into the lungs. He inhaled green salt water. And then, as the palps demurely unraveled their nano-tube outer integuments and infiltrated them into his lungs, his bronchial tubes, his bloodstream, he *became*. Memories stirred, invoked by olfactory summonings, changed as a new voice, a new way of seeing, a new interpretation of those memories and experiences, formed. Nejben swam down, breathing memory-water, stroke by stroke unraveling. There was another down there, far below him, swimming up not through water but through the twelve years of his life. A new self.

Puzhay, against the light of a three o'clock sky. Framed in the arch of a cell window, knees pulled up to her chest. Small budding breasts; strong, boy jawline, fall and arc of hair shadow against lilac. She had laughed, throwing her head back. That first sight of her was cut into Nejben's memory, every line and trace, like the paper silhouettes the limners would cut of friends and families and enemies for Autumn Solstice. That first stirring of sex, that first intimation in the self of Ptey of this then-stranger, now-familiar Nejben.

As soon as he could, he had run. After he had found out where to put his bag, after he had worked out how to use the ancient, gurgling shit-eater, after agister Ashbey had closed the door with a smile and a blessing on the wooden cell—his wooden cell—that still smelled of fresh-cut timber after hundreds of years on the world-ocean of Tay. In the short season in which photosynthesis was possible, Bedenderay's forests grew fast and fierce, putting on meters in a single day. Small wonder the wood still smelled fresh and lively. After the midnight walk along the ceramic lanes and up the wooden staircases and through the damp-smelling cloisters, through the gently undulating quadrangles with the sky-train of the Anpreen migration bright overhead, holding on, as tradition demanded, to the bell hung by a chain from his agister's waist; after the form filling and the photographings and the registering and the this-is-your-ident-card this is your map I've tattooed onto the back of your hand trust it will guide you and I am your agister and we'll see you in the east Refectory for breakfast; after the climb up the slimy wooden stairs from *Sail of Bright Anticipation* on to the

Manifold House's quay, the biolights green around him and the greater lamps of the great college's towers high before him; when he was alone in this alien new world where he would become eight alien new people: He ran.

Agister Ashbey was faithful; the tattoo, a clever print of smart molecules and nanodyes, was meshed into the Manifold House's network and guided him through the labyrinth of dormitories and cloisters and Boy's Pavilions and Girlhearts by the simple, aversive trick of stinging the opposite side his map-hand to the direction in which he was to turn.

Cjatay. Sea-sundered friend. The only other one who knew him, knew him the moment they had met outside the school walls and recognized each other as different from the sailing freaks and fishing fools. Interested in geography, in love with numbers, with the wonder of the world and the worlds, as the city net declared, beyond. Boys who looked up at the sky.

As his burning hand led him left, right, up this spiral staircase under the lightening sky, such was Ptey's impetus that he never thought, would he know Cjatay? Cjatay had been in the Manifold House three months. Cjatay could be—*would* be—any number of Aspects now. Ptey had grown up with his father's overlapping circles of friends, each specific to a different Aspect, but he had assumed that it was a grown-up thing. That couldn't happen to him and Cjatay! Not them.

The cell was one of four that opened off a narrow oval at the head of a tulip-shaped minaret—the Third Moon of Spring Tower, the legend on the back of Ptey's hand read. Cells were assigned by birthdate and season. Head and heart full of nothing but seeing Cjatay, he pushed open the door—no door in the Manifold House was ever locked.

She was in the arched window, dangerously high above the shingled roofs and porcelain domes of the Vernal Equinox division. Beyond her, only the wandering stars of the Anpreen. Ptey had no name for the sudden rush of feelings that came when he saw Puzhay throw back her head and laugh at some so-serious comment of Cjatay's. Nejben did.

It was only at introductory breakfast in the East Refectory, where he met the other uncertain, awkward boys and girls of his intake, that Ptey saw past the dawn seduction of Puzhay to Cjatay, and saw him unchanged, exactly as he had had been when he had stepped down from Etjay Quay

into the catamaran and been taken out across the lagoon to the waste gas flares of Temejveri.

She was waiting crouched on the wooden steps where the water of the Chalybeate Pool lapped, knees pulled to her chest, goose flesh pimply her forearms and calves in the cool of after-midnight. He knew this girl, knew her name, knew her history, knew the taste of a small, tentative kiss stolen among the crowds of teenagers pushing over Twelfth Canal Bridge. The memory was sharp and warm, but it was another's.

“Hi there.”

He dragged himself out of the water onto the silvery wood, rolled away to hide his nakedness. In the cloister shadow, Ashbey waited with a sea-silk robe.

“Hi there.” There was never any easy way to tell someone you were another person from the one they remembered. “I’m Serejen.” The name had been there, down among the palps, slipped into him with their mind-altering neurotransmitters.

“Are you?”

“All right. Yes, I’m all right.” A tickle in the throat made him cough, the cough amplified into a deep retch. Serejen choked up a lungful of mucus-stained palp-jelly. In the early light, it thinned and ran, flowed down the steps to rejoin its shoal in the Chalybeate Pool. Agister Ashbey took a step forward. Serejen waved her away.

“What time is it?”

“Four thirty.”

Almost five hours.

“Serejen.” Puzhay looked coyly away. Around the Chalybeate Pool, other soul-swimmers were emerging, coughing up lungfuls of palp, shivering in their thermal robes, growing into new Aspects of themselves. “It’s Cjatay. He needs to see you. Dead urgent.”

Waiting Ashbey folded newborn Serejen in his own thermal gown, the intelligent plastics releasing their stored heat to his particular body temperature.

“Go to him,” his agister said.

“I thought I was supposed to...”

“You’ve got the rest of your life to get to know Serejen. I think you should go.”

Cjatay. A memory of fascination with starry skies, counting and numbering and betting games. The name and the face belonged to another Aspect, another life, but that old lust for numbers, for discovering the relationships between things, stirred a deep welling of joy. It was as rich and adult as the swelling of his dick he found in the bright mornings, or when he thought about Puzhay’s breasts in his hands and the tattooed triangle of her sex. Different; no less intense.

The shutters were pulled close. The screen was the sole light in the room. Cjatay turned on hearing his lockless door open. He squinted into the gloom of the stair head, then cried excitedly,

“Look at this look at this!”

Pictures from the observation platforms sent to Tejaphay to monitor the doings of the Anpreen. A black-light plane of stars, the blinding blue curve of the water world stopped down to prevent screen-burn. The closer habitats showed a disc, otherwise it was moving lights. Patterns of speed and gravity.

“What am I looking at?”

“Look look, they’re building a space elevator! I wondered how they were going to get the water from Tejaphay. Simple, duh! They’re just going to vacuum it up! They’ve got some kind of processing unit in stationary orbit chewing up one of those asteroids they brought with them, but they using one of their own habitats to anchor it.”

“At twice stationary orbit,” Serejen said. “So they’re going to have to build down and up at the same time to keep the elevator in tension.” He did not know where the words came from. They were on his lips and they were true.

“It must be some kind of nano-carbon compound,” Cjatay said, peering at the screen for some hint, some elongation, some erection from the fuzzy blob of the construction asteroid. “Incredible tensile strength, yet very flexible. We have to get that; with all our oil, it could change everything about our technology. It could really make us a proper star-faring people.” Then, as if hearing truly for the first time, Cjatay turned from the screen and peered again at the figure in the doorway. “Who are you?” His voice was high and soft and plaintive.

“I’m Serejen.”

“You sound like Ptey.”

“I was Ptey. I remember him.”

Cjatay did a thing with his mouth, a twisting, chewing movement that Serejen recalled from moments of unhappiness and frustration. The time at his sister’s nameday party, when all the birth family was gathered and he had shown how it was almost certain that someone in the house on Drunken Chicken Lane had the same nameday as little Sezjma. There had been a long, embarrassed silence as Cjatay had burst into the adult chatter. Then laughter. And again, when Cjatay had worked out how long it would take to walk a light-year and Teacher Deu has asked the class *does anyone understand this?* For a moment, Serejen thought that the boy might cry. That would have been a terrible thing; unseemly, humiliating. Then he saw the bag on the unkempt bed, the ritual white clothes thrust knotted and fighting into it.

“I think what Cjatay wants to say is that he’s leaving the Manifold House,” agister Ashbey said, in the voice that Serejen understood as the one adults used when they had uncomfortable things to say. In that voice was a hidden word that Ashbey would not, that Serejen and Puzhay could not, and that Cjatay never would speak.

There was one in every town, every district. Kentlay had lived at the bottom of Drunken Chicken Lane, still at fortysomething living with his birth-parents. He had never married, though then-Ptey had heard that some did, and not just others like them. Normals. Multiples. Kentlay had been a figure that drew pity and respect alike; equally blessed and cursed, the Lonely were granted insights and gifts in compensation for their inability to manifold into the Eight Aspects. Kentlay had the touch for skin diseases, warts, and the sicknesses of birds. Ptey had been sent to see him for the charm of a dangling wart on his chin. The wart was gone within a week. Even then, Ptey had wondered if it had been through unnatural gifts or superstitious fear of the alien at the end of the wharf.

Cjatay. Lonely. The words were as impossible together as *green sun* or *bright winter*. It was never to be like this. Though the waters of the Chalybeate Pool would break them into many brilliant shards, though there would be other lives, other friends, even other wives and husbands, there would always be aspects of themselves that remembered trying to draw

birds and fishes on the glowing band of the Mid Winter Galaxy that hung in the sky for weeks on end, or trying to calculate the mathematics of the High Summer silverlings that shoaled like silver needles in the Lagoon, how they kept together yet apart, how they were many but moved as one. *Boiling rain. Summer ice. A morning where the sun wouldn't rise. A friend who would always, only be one person.* Impossibilities. Cjatay could not be abnormal. Dark word. A vile word that hung on Cjatay like an oil-stained tarpaulin.

He sealed his bag and slung it over his shoulder.

"I'll give you a call when you get back."

"Yeah. Okay. That would be good." Words and needs and sayings flocked to him, but the end was so fast, so sudden, that all Serejen could do was stare at his feet so that he would not have to see Cjatay walk away. Puzhay was in tears. Cjatay's own agister, a tall, dark-skinned Summer-born, put his arm around Cjatay and took him to the stairs.

"Hey. Did you ever think?" Cjatay threw back the line from the top of the spiral stair. "Why are they here? The Anpreen." Even now, Serejen realized, Cjatay was hiding from the truth that he would be marked as different, as not fully human, for the rest of his life, hiding behind stars and ships and the mystery of the alien. "Why did they come here? They call it the Anpreen Migration, but where are they migrating to? And what are they migrating from? Anyone ever ask that? Ever think about that, eh?"

Then agister Ashbey closed the door on the high tower-top cell.

"We'll talk later."

Gulls screamed. Change in the weather coming. On the screen behind him, stars moved across the face of the great water.

Serejen could not bear to go down to the quay, but watched *Sail of Bright Anticipation* make sail from the cupola of the Bright Glance Netball Hall. The Manifold House was sailing through a plankton-bloom and he watched the ritual catamaran's hulls cut two lines of bioglow through the carpet of carbon-absorbing microlife. He stood and followed the sails until they were lost among the hulls of huge ceramic oil tankers pressed low to the orange smog-glow of Ctarisphay down under the horizon. Call each other. They would always forget to do that. They would slip out of each other's lives—Serejen's life now vastly more rich and populous as he moved across the social worlds of his various Aspects. In time, they would

slip out of each other's thoughts and memories. So it was that Serejen Nejben ex-Ptey knew that he was not a child any longer. He could let things go.

After morning Shift class, Serejen went down to the Old Great Pool, the ancient flooded piazza that was the historic heart of the Manifold House, and used the techniques he had learned an hour before to effortlessly transfer from Serejen to Nejbet. Then he went down into the waters and swam with Puzhay. She was teary and confused, but the summer-warmed water and the physical exercise brightened her. Under a sky lowering with the summer storm that the gulls had promised, they sought out the many secret flooded colonnades and courts where the big groups of friends did not go. There, under the first crackles of lightning and the hiss of rain, he kissed her and she slipped her hand into his swimsuit and cradled the comfortable swell of his cock.

#### **Serejen, loving**

NIGHT, THE AURORA AND SIRENS. Serejen shivered as police drones came in low over the Conservatorium roof. Through the high, arched windows, fires could still be seen burning on Yaskaray Prospect. The power had not yet been restored, the streets, the towering apartment blocks that lined them, were still dark. A stalled tram sprawled across a set of points, flames flickering in its rear carriage. The noise of the protest had moved off, but occasional shadows moved across the ice beneath the mesmerism of the aurora; student rioters, police security robots. It was easy to tell the robots by the sprays of ice crystals thrown up by their needle-tip, mincing legs.

"Are you still at that window? Come away from there, if they see you they might shoot you. Look, I've tea made."

"Who?"

"What?"

"Who might shoot me? The rioters or the police?"

"Like you'd care if you were dead."

But he came and sat at the table and took the bowl of thin, salty Bedenderay maté.

"But sure I can't be killed."



Her name was Seriantep. She was an Anpreen Prebendary ostensibly attached to the College of Theoretical Physics at the Conservatorium of Jann. She looked like a tall, slim young woman with the dark skin and blue-black hair of a Summer-born Archipelagan, but that was just the form that the swarm of Anpreen nano-processor motes had assumed. She hived. Reris Orhum Fejannan Kekjay Prus Rejmer Serejen Nejben wondered how close you had to get before her perfect skin resolved into a blur of microscopic motes. He had had much opportunity to make this observation. As well as being his notional student—though what a functionally immortal hive-citizen who had crossed one hundred twenty light-years could learn from a fresh twentysomething meat human was moot—she was his occasional lover.

She drank the tea. Serejen watched the purse of her lips around the delicate porcelain bowl decorated with the ubiquitous Lord of the Fishes motif, even in high, dry continental Jann. The small movement of her throat as she swallowed. He knew a hundred such tiny, intimate movements, but even as she cooed and giggled and gasped to the stimulations of the Five Leaves, Five Fishes ritual, the involuntary actions of her body had seemed like performances. Learned responses. Performances as he made observations. Actor and audience. That was the kind of lover he was as Serejen.

“So what is it really like to fuck a pile of nano-motes?” Puzhay had asked as they rolled around with wine in the cozy warm fleshiness of the Thirteenth Window Coupling Porch at the ancient, academic Ogrun Menholding. “I’d imagine it feels... fizzy.” And she’d squeezed his cock, holding it hostage, watch what you say boy.

“At least nano-motes never get morning breath,” he’d said, and she’d given a little shriek of outrage and jerked his dick so that he yelped, and then they both laughed and then rolled over again and buried themselves deep into the winter-defying warmth of the piled quilts.

*I should be with her now*, he thought. The months-long winter nights beneath the aurora and the stars clouds of the great galaxy were theirs. After the Manifold House, he had gone with her to her Bedenderay and her home city of Jann. The City Conservatorium had the world’s best theoretical physics department. It was nothing to do with small, boyish, funny Puzhay. They had formalized a partnering six months later. His parents had

complained and shivered through all the celebrations in this cold and dark and barbarous city far from the soft elegance of island life. But ever after winter, even on the coldest mornings when carbon dioxide frost crusted the steps of the Tea Lane Ladyhearth where Puzhay lived, was their season. He should call her, let her know he was still trapped but that at the first sign, the very first sign, he would come back. The cell net was still up. Even an email. He couldn't. Seriantep didn't know. Seriantep wouldn't understand. She had not understood that one time when he tried to explain it in abstracts; that different Aspects could—should—have different relationships with different partners, love separately but equally. *That as Serejen, I love you, Anpreen Prebendary Seriantep, but as Nejben, I love Puzhay.* He could never say that. For an immortal, starcrossing hive of nano motes, Seriantep was very singleminded.

Gunfire cracked in the crystal night, far and flat.

"I think it's dying down," Seriantep said.

"I'd give it a while yet."

So strange, so rude, this sudden flaring of anti-alien violence. In the dreadful dead of winter, too, when nothing should rightfully fight and even the trees along Yaskaray Prospect drew down to their heartwood and turned to ice. Despite the joy of Puzhay, Serejen knew that he would always hate the Bedenderay winter. *You watch out now*, his mother had said when he had announced his decision to go to Jann. *They all go dark-mad there.* Accidie and suicide walked the frozen canals of the Winter City. No surprise then that madness should break out against the Anpreen Prebendaries. Likewise inevitable that the popular rage should be turned against the Conservatorium. The university had always been seen as a place apart from the rest of Jann, in summer aloof and lofty above the sweltering streets, like an over-grand daughter; in winter a parasite on this most marginal of economies. Now it was the unofficial alien embassy in the northern hemisphere. There were more Anpreen in its long, small-windowed corridors than anywhere else in the world.

*There are no aliens*, Serejen thought. *There is only the Clade. We are all family. Cjatay had insisted that.* The ship had sailed over the horizon, they hadn't called, they had drifted from each other's lives. Cjatay's name occasionally impinged on Serejen's awareness through radio interviews and opinion pieces. He had developed a darkly paranoid conspiracy theory

around the Anpreen Presence. Serejen, high above the frozen streets of Jann in deeply abstract speculation about the physical reality of mathematics, occasionally mused upon the question of at what point the Migration had become a Presence. The Lonely often obsessively took up narrow, focused interests. Now the street was listening, acting. Great Winter always was a dark, paranoid season. *Here's how to understand*, Serejen thought. *There are no aliens after you've had sex with them.*

Helicopter blades rattled from the walls of the College of Theoretical Physics and then retreated across the Central Canal. The silence in the warm, dimly lit little faculty cell was profound. At last, Serejen said, "I think we could go now."

On the street, cold stabbed even through the quilted layers of Serejen's great-coat. He fastened the high collar across his throat and still he felt the breath crackle into ice around his lips. Seriantep stepped lightly between the half bricks and bottle shards in nothing more than the tunic and leggings she customarily wore around the college. Her motes gave her full control over her body, including its temperature.

"You should have put something on," Serejen said. "You're a bit obvious."

Past shuttered cafés and closed up stores and the tall brick faces of the student Hearths. The burning tram on the Tunday Avenue junction blazed fitfully, its bitter smoke mingling with the eternal aromatic hydrocarbon smog exhaled by Jann's power plants. The trees that lined the avenue's center strip were folded down into tight fists, dreaming of summer. Their boot heels rang loud on the street tiles.

A darker shape upon the darkness moved in the narrow slit of an alley between two towering tenement blocks. Serejen froze, his heart jerked. A collar turned down, a face studying his—Obredajay from the Department of Field Physics.

"Safe home."

"Aye. And you."

The higher academics all held apartments within the Conservatorium and were safe within its walls; most of the research staff working late would sit it out until morning. Tea and news reports would see them through. Those out on the fickle streets had reasons to be there. Serejen had heard that Obredajay was head-over-heels infatuated with a new manfriend.

#

On the intersection of Tunday Avenue and Yaskaray Wharf, a police robot stepped out of the impervious dark of the arches beneath General Gatoris Bridge. Pistons hissed it up to its full three meters; green light flicked across Serejen's retinas. Seriantep held up her hand, the motes of her palm displaying her immunity as a Prebendary of the Clade. The machine shrank down, seemingly dejected, if plastic and pumps could display such an emotion.

A solitary tea shop stood open on the corner of Silver Spider Entry and the Wharf, its windows misty with steam from the simmering urns. Security eyes turned and blinked at the two fleeing academics.

On Tannis Lane, they jumped them. There was no warning. A sudden surge of voices rebounding from the stone staircases and brick arches broke into a wave of figures lumbering around the turn of the alley, bulky and shouldering in their heavy winter quilts. Some held sticks, some held torn placards, some were empty handed. They saw a man in a heavy winter coat, breath frosted on his mouth-shield. They saw a woman almost naked, her breath easy, unclouded. They knew in an instant what she saw. The hubbub in the laneway became a roar.

Serejen and Seriantep were already in flight. Sensing rapid motion, the soles of Serejen's boots extended grips into the rime. As automatically, he felt the heart-numbing panic-rush ebb, felt himself lose his grip on his body and grow pale. Another was taking hold, his flight-or-fight Aspect; his cool, competent emergency service Fejannen.

He seized Seriantep's hand.

"With me. Run!"

Serejen-Fejannen saw the change of Aspect flicker across the tea shop owner's face like weather as they barged through his door, breathless between his stables. Up to his counter with its looming, steaming urns of hot hot water. This tea-man wanted them out, wanted his livelihood safe.

"We need your help."

The tea-man's eyes and nostrils widened at the charge of rioters that skidded and slipped around the corner in to Silver Spider Entry. Then his hand hit the button under the counter and the shutters rolled down. The shop boomed, the shutters bowed to fists striking them. Rocks banged like

gunfire from metal. Voices rose and joined together, louder because they were unseen.

"I've called the police," Seriantep said. "They'll be here without delay."

"No, they won't," Fejannen said. He pulled out a chair from the table closest the car and sat down, edgily eying the grey slats of the shutter. "Their job is to restore order and protect property. Providing personal protection to aliens is far down their list of priorities."

Seriantep took the chair opposite. She sat down wary as a settling bird.

"What's going on here? I don't understand. I'm very scared."

The café owner set two glasses of maté down on the table. He frowned, then his eyes opened in understanding. An alien at his table. He returned to the bar and leaned on it, staring at the shutters beyond which the voice of the mob circled.

"I thought you said you couldn't be killed."

"That's not what I'm scared of. I'm scared of you, Serejen."

"I'm not Serejen. I'm Fejannen."

"Who, what's Fejannen?"

"Me, when I'm scared, when I'm angry, when I need to be able to think clearly and coolly when a million things are happening at once, when I'm playing games or hunting or putting a big funding proposal together."

"You sound... different."

"I *am* different. How long have you been on our world?"

"You're hard. And cold. Serejen was never hard."

"I'm not Serejen."

A huge crash—the shutter bowed under a massive impact and the window behind it shattered.

"Right, that's it, I don't care what happens, you're going." The tea-man leaped from behind his counter and strode toward Seriantep. Fejannen was there to meet him.

"This woman is a guest in your country and requires your protection."

"That's not a woman. That's a pile of... insects. Things. Tiny things."

"Well, they look like mighty scared tiny things."

"I don't think so. Like you said, like they say on the news, they can't really die."

"They can hurt. She can hurt."

Eyes locked, then disengaged. The maté-man returned to his towering silos of herbal mash. The noise from the street settled into a stiff, waiting silence. Neither Fejannen nor Seriantep believed that it was true, that the mob had gone, despite the spearing cold out there. The lights flickered once, twice.

Seriantep said suddenly, vehemently, "I could take them."

The tea-man looked up.

"Don't." Fejannen whispered.

"I could. I could get out under the door. It's just a reforming."

The tea-man's eyes were wide. A demon, a winter-grim in his prime location canal-side tea shop!

"You scare them enough as you are," Fejannen said.

"Why? We're only here to help, to learn from you."

"They think, what have you got to learn from *us*? They think that you're keeping secrets from us."

"Us?"

"Them. Don't scare them any more. The police will come, eventually, or the Conservatorium proctors. Or they'll just get bored and go home. These things never really last."

"You're right." She slumped back into her seat. "This fucking world... Oh, why did I come here?" Seriantep glanced up at the inconstant lumetubes, beyond to the distant diadem of her people's colonies, gravid on decades of water. It was a question, Fejannen knew, that Serejen had asked himself many times. A post-graduate scholar researching space-time topologies and the cosmological constant. A thousand-year-old post-human innocently wearing the body of a twenty-year-old woman, playing the student. She could learn nothing from him. All the knowledge the Anpreen wanderers had gained in their ten-thousand-year migration was incarnate in her motes. She embodied all truth and she lied with every cell of her body. Anpreen secrets. No basis for a relationship, yet Serejen loved her, as Serejen could love. But was it any more for her than novelty; a tourist, a local boy, a brief summer loving?

Suddenly, vehemently, Seriantep leaned across the table to take Fejannen's face between her hands.

"Come with me."

"Where? Who?"

“Who?” She shook her head in exasperation. “Ahh! Serejen. But it would be you as well, it has to be you. To my place, to the Commonweal. I’ve wanted to ask you for so long. I’d love you to see my worlds. Hundreds of worlds, like jewels, dazzling in the sun. And inside, under the ice, the worlds within worlds within worlds... I made the application for a travel bursary months ago, I just couldn’t ask.”

“Why? What kept you from asking?” A small but significant traffic of diplomats, scientists, and journalists flowed between Tay and the Anpreen fleet around Tejaphay. The returnees enjoyed global celebrity status, their opinions and experiences sought by think-tanks and talk shows and news-site columns, the details of the faces and lives sought by the press. Serejen had never understood what it was the people expected from the celebrity of others but was not so immured behind the fortress walls of the Collegium, armoured against the long siege of High Winter, that he couldn’t appreciate its personal benefits. The lights seemed to brighten, the sense of the special hush outside, that was not true silence but waiting, dimmed as Serejen replaced Fejannen. “Why didn’t you ask.”

“Because I thought you might refuse.”

“Refuse?” The few, the golden few. “Turn down the chance to work in the Commonweal? Why would anyone do that, why would I do that?”

Seriantep looked long at him, her head cocked slightly, alluringly, to one side, the kind of gesture an alien unused to a human body might devise.

“You’re Serejen again, aren’t you?”

“I am that Aspect again, yes.”

“Because I thought you might refuse because of her. That other woman. Puzhay.”

Serejen blinked three times. From Seriantep’s face, he knew that she expected some admission, some confession, some emotion. He could not understand what.

Seriantep said, “I know about her. We know things at the Anpreen Mission. We check whom we work with. We have to. We know not everyone welcomes us, and that more are suspicious of us. I know who she is and where she lives and what you do with her three times a week when you go to her. I know where you were intending to go tonight, if all this hadn’t happened.”

Three times again, Serejen blinked. Now he was hot, too hot in his winter quilt in this steamy, fragrant tea shop.

“But that’s a ridiculous question. I don’t love Puzhay. Nejben does.”

“Yes, but you *are* Nejben.”

“How many times do I have to tell you...” Serejen bit back the anger. There were Aspects hovering on the edge of his consciousness like the hurricane-front angels of the Bazjendi Psalmody; selves inappropriate to Seriantep. Aspects that in their rage and storm might lose him this thing, so finely balanced now in this tea shop. “It’s our way,” he said weakly. “It’s how we are.”

“Yes, but...” Seriantep fought for words. “It’s *you*, there, that body. You say it’s different, you say it’s someone else and not you, not Serejen, but how do I know that? How *can* I know that?”

*You say that, with your body that in this tea shop you said could take many forms, any form,* Serejen thought. Then Fejannen, shadowed but never more than a thought away in this besieged, surreal environment, heard a shift in the silence outside. The tea-man glanced up. He had heard it too. The difference between waiting and anticipating.

“Excuse me, I must change Aspects.”

A knock on the shutter, glove-muffled. A voice spoke Fejannen’s full name. A voice that Fejannen knew from his pervasive fear of the risk his academic Aspect was taking with Seriantep and that Serejen knew from those news reports and articles that broke through his vast visualisations of the topology of the universe and that Nejben knew from a tower top cell and a video screen full of stars.

“Came I come in?”

Fejannen nodded to the tea-man. He ran the shutter up high enough for the bulky figure in the long quilted coat and boots to duck under. Dreadful cold blew around Fejannen.

Cjatay bowed, removed his gloves, banging rime from the knuckles and made the proper formalities to ascertain which Aspect he was speaking to.

“I have to apologize; I only recently learned that it was you who were caught here.”

The voice, the intonations and inflections, the over-precisions and refinements—no time might have passed since Cjatay walked out of



Manifold House. In a sense, no time *had* passed; Cjatay was caught, inviolable, unchangeable by anything other than time and experience. Lonely.

“The police will be here soon,” Seriantep said.

“Yes, they will,” Cjatay said mildly. He looked Seriantep up and down, as if studying a zoological specimen. “They have us well surrounded now. These things are almost never planned; what we gain in spontaneity of expression we lose in strategy. But when I realized it was you, Fejannen-Nejben, I saw a way that we could all emerge from this intact.”

“Safe passage,” Fejannen said.

“I will personally escort you out.”

“And no harm at all to you, politically.”

“I need to distance myself from what has happened tonight.”

“But your fundamental fear of the visitors remains unchanged?”

“I don’t change. You know that. I see it as a virtue. Some things are solid, some things endure. Not everything changes with the seasons. But fear, you said. That’s clever. Do you remember, that last time I saw you, back in the Manifold House. Do you remember what I said?”

“Nejben remembers you asking, where are they migrating to? And what are they migrating from?”

“In all your seminars and tutorials and conferences, in all those questions about the shape of the universe—oh, we have our intelligences too, less broad than the Anpreen’s, but subtler, we think—did you ever think to *ask* that question: Why have you come here?” Cjatay’s chubby, still childish face was an accusation. “You are fucking her, I presume?”

In a breath, Fejannen had slipped from his seat into the Third Honorable Offense Stance. A hand on his shoulder; the teashop owner. No honor in it, not against a Lonely. Fejannen returned to his seat, sick with shuddering rage.

“Tell him,” Cjatay said.

“It’s very simple,” Seriantep said. “We are refugees. The Anpreen Commonweal is the surviving remnant of the effective annihilation of our subspecies of Panhumanity. Our eight hundred habitats are such a minuscule percentage of our original race that, to all statistical purposes, we are extinct. Our habitats once englobed an entire sun. We’re all that’s left.”

“How? Who?”

“Not so much *who*, as *when*,” Cjatay said gently. He flexed cold-blued fingers and pulled on his gloves.

“They’re coming?”

“We fear so,” Seriantep said. “We don’t know. We were careful to leave no traces, to cover our tracks, so to speak, and we believe we have centuries of a headstart on them. We are only here to refuel our habitats, then we’ll go, hide ourselves in some great globular cluster.”

“But why, *why* would anyone do this? We’re all the same species, that’s what you told us. The Clade, Panhumanity.”

“Brothers disagree,” Cjatay said. “Families fall out, families feud within themselves. No animosity like it.”

“Is this true? How can this be true? Who knows about this?” Serejen strove with Fejannen for control and understanding. One of the first lessons the Agisters of the Manifold House had taught was the etiquette of transition between conflicting Aspects. A war in the head, a conflict of selves. He could understand sibling strife on a cosmic scale. But a whole species?

“The governments,” Cjatay said. To the tea-man, “Open the shutter again. You be all right with us. I promise.” To Serejen, “Politicians, some senior academics, and policy makers. And us. Not you. But we all agree, we don’t want to scare anyone. So we question the Anpreen Prebendaries on our world, and question their presence in our system, and maybe sometimes it bubbles into xenophobic violence, but that’s fine, that’s the price, that’s nothing compared to what would happen if we realized that our guests might be drawing the enemies that destroyed them to our homes. Come on. We’ll go now.”

The tea-man lifted the shutter. Outside, the protestors stood politely aside as Cjatay led the refugees out on to the street. There was not a murmur as Seriantep, in her ridiculous, life-threatening house clothes, stepped across the cobbles. The great Winter Clock on the tower of Alajnedeng stood at twenty past five. The morning shift would soon be starting, the hot-shops firing their ovens and fry-pots.

A murmur in the crowd as Serejen took Seriantep’s hand.

“Is it true?” he whispered.

“Yes,” she said. “It is.”

He looked up at the sky that would hold stars for another three endless months. The aurora coiled and spasmed over huddling Jann. Those stars were like crystal spearpoints. The universe was vast and cold and inimical to humanity, the greatest of Great Winters. He had never deluded himself it would be otherwise. Power had been restored, yellow street light glinted from the helmets of riot control officers and the carapaces of counterinsurgency drones. Serejen squeezed Seriantep's hand.

"What you asked."

"When?"

"Then. Yes. I will. Yes."

### **Torben, melting**

THE ANPREEN SHATTER-SHIP blazed star-bright as it turned its face to the sun. A splinter of smart-ice, it was as intricate as a snowflake, stronger than any construct of Taynish engineering. Torben hung in free-fall in the observation dome at the center of the cross of solar vanes. The Anpreen, being undifferentiated from the motes seeded through the hull, had no need for such architectural fancies. Their senses were open to space; the fractal shell of the ship was one great retina. They had grown the blister—pure and perfectly transparent construction-ice—for the comfort and delight of their human guests.

The sole occupant of the dome, Torben was also the sole passenger on this whole alien, paradoxical ship. Another would have been good. Another could have shared the daily, almost hourly shocks of strange and new and wonder. His other Aspects had felt with Torben the breath-catch of awe, and even greater privilege, when he had looked from the orbital car of the space elevator—the Anpreen's gift to the peoples of Tay—and seen the shatter-ship turn out of occultation in a blaze of silver light as it came in to dock. They had felt his glow of intellectual vindication as he first swam clumsily into the star-dome and discovered, with a shock, that the orbital transfer station was no more than a cluster of navigation lights almost lost in the star fields beyond. No sense of motion. His body had experienced no hint of acceleration. He had been correct. The Anpreen could adjust the topology of spacetime. But there was no one but his several selves to tell it to. The

Anpreen crew—Torben was not sure whether it was one or many, or if that distinction had any meaning—was remote and alien. On occasion, as he swam down the live-wood panelled corridors, monoflipper and web-mittens pushing thick, humid air, he had glimpsed a swirl of silver motes twisting and knotting like a captive waterspout. Always they had dispersed in his presence. But the ice beyond those wooden walls, pressing in around him, felt alive, crawling, aware.

Seriantep had gone ahead months before him.

“There’s work I have to do.”

There had been a party; there was always a party at the Anpreen Mission among the evergreen slopes of generous, volcanic Sulanj. Fellow academics, press and PR from Ctarisphay, politicians, family members, and the Anpreen Prebendaries, eerie in their uniform loveliness.

“You can do the research work on Thirty-Third Tranquil Abode, that’s the idea,” Seriantep had said. Beyond the paper lanterns hung in the trees and the glow of the carbon-sink lagoon, the lights of space-elevator cars rose up until they merged with the stars. She would ride that narrow way to orbit within days. Serejen wondered how he would next recognize her.

“You have to go.” Puzhay stood in the balcony of the Tea Lane Ladyhearth, recently opened to allow spring warmth into rooms that had sweated and stifled and stunk all winter long. She looked out at the shooting, uncoiling fresh green of the trees along Uskuben Avenue. Nothing there you have not seen before, Nejben thought. Unless it is something that is the absence of me.

“It’s not forever,” Nejben said. “I’ll be back in year, maybe two years.” But not here, he thought. He would not say it, but Puzhay knew it. As a returnee, the world’s conservatoriums would be his. Bright cities, sun-warmed campuses far from the terrible cold on this polar continent, the winter that had driven them together.

All the goodbyes, eightfold goodbyes for each of his Aspects. And then he took sail for the ancient hospice of Bleyn, for sail was the only right way to come to those reefs of ceramic chapels that had clung to the Yesger atoll for three thousand hurricane seasons.

“I need... another,” he whispered in the salt-breezy, chiming cloisters to Shaper Rejmen. “The curiosity of Serejen is too naive, the suspicion of

Fejannen is too jagged, and the social niceties of Kekjay are too too eager to be liked.”

“We can work this for you,” the Shaper said. The next morning, he went down into the sweet, salt waters of the Othering Pots and let the programmed palps swarm over him, as he did for twenty mornings after. In the thunder-heavy gloaming of a late spring night storm, he awoke to find he was Torben. Clever, inquisitive, wary, socially adept and conversationally witty Torben. Extreme need and exceptional circumstances permitted the creation of Nineths, but only, always. Temporarily. Tradition as strong as an incest taboo demanded that the number of Aspects reflect the eight phases of Tay’s manic seasons.

The Anpreen shatter-ship spun on its vertical axis and Torben Reris Orhum Fejannan Kekjay Prus Rejmer Serejen Nejben looked on in wonder. Down, up, forward: His orientation shifted with every breath of air in the observation dome. An eye, a monstrous eye. Superstition chilled him, childhood stories of the Dejved whose sole eye was the eye of the storm and whose body was the storm entire. Then he unfolded the metaphor. An anti-eye. Tejaphay was a shield of heartbreaking blue, streaked and whorled with perpetual storms. The Anpreen space habitat *Thirty-Third Tranquil Abode*, hard-docked these two years past to the anchor end of the space elevator, was a blind white pupil, an anti-pupil, an unseeing opacity. The shatter-ship was approaching from Tejaphay’s axial plane, the mechanisms of the orbital pumping station were visible beyond the habitat’s close horizon. The space elevator was a cobweb next to the habitat’s three-hundred-kilometer bulk, less even than a thread compared to enormous Tejaphay, but as the whole assemblage turned into daylight, it woke sparkling, glittering as sun reflected from its billions of construction-ice scales. A fresh metaphor came to Torben: the sperm of the divine. *You’re swimming the wrong way!* he laughed to himself, delighted at this infant Aspect’s unsuspected tendency to express in metaphor what Serejen would have spoken in math, Kekjay in flattery, and Fejannen not at all. No, it’s our whole system it’s fertilizing, he thought.

The Anpreen ship drew closer, manipulating space-time on the centimeter scale. Surface details resolved from the ice glare. The hull of *Thirty-Third Tranquil Abode* was a chaotic mosaic of sensors, docks, manufacturing hubs, and still less comprehensible technology, all

constructed from smart-ice. A white city. A flight of shatter-ships detached from docking arms like a flurry of early snow. Were some of those icy mesas defensive systems; did some of those ice canyons, as precisely cut as a skater's figures, conceal inconceivable weapons? Had the Anpreen ever paused to consider that to all cultures of Tay, white was the colour of distrust, the white of snow in the long season of dark?

Days in free-gee had desensitised Torben sufficiently so that he was aware of the subtle pull of nanogravity in his belly. Against the sudden excitement and the accompanying vague fear of the unknown, he tried to calculate the gravity of *Thirty-Third Tranquil Abode*, changing every hour as it siphoned up water from Tejaphay. While he was still computing the figures, the shatter-ship performed another orientation flip and came in to dock at one of the radial elevator heads, soft as a kiss to a loved face.

On tenth days, they went to the falls, Korpa and Belej, Sajhay and Hannaj, Yetger and Torben. When he stepped out of the elevator that had taken him down through thirty kilometers of solid ice, Torben had imagined something like the faculty of Jann; wooden-screen cloisters and courts roofed with ancient painted ceilings, thronged with bright, smart, talkative students boiling with ideas and vision. He found Korpa and Belej, Sajhay, Hannaj, and Yetger all together in a huge, windy construct of cells and tunnels and abrupt balconies and netted-in ledges, like a giant wasps' nest suspended from the curved ceiling of the interior hollow.

"Continuum topology is a tad specialised, I'll admit that," Belej said. She was a sting-thin quantum-foam specialist from Yeldes in the southern archipelago of Ninnt, gone even thinner and bonier in the attenuated gravity of *Thirty-Third Tranquil Abode*. "If it's action you're looking for, you should get over to Twenty Eighth. They're sociologists."

Sajhay had taught him how to fly.

"There are a couple of differences from the transfer ship," he said as he showed Torben how to pull up the fish-tail mono-tights and how the plumbing vents worked. "It's lo-gee, but it's not no-gee, so you will eventually come down again. And it's easy to build up too much delta-vee. The walls are light but they're strong and you will hurt yourself. And the nets are there for a reason. Whatever you do, don't go through them. If you end up in that sea, it'll take you apart."

That sea haunted Torben's unsettled, nanogee dreams. The world-sea, the two-hundred-twenty-kilometer diameter sphere of water, its slow, huge nanogee waves forever breaking into globes and tears the size of clouds. The seething, dissolving sea into which the Anpreen dissipated, many lives into one immense, diffuse body which whispered to him through the paper tunnels of the Soujourners' house. Not so strange, perhaps. Yet he constantly wondered what it would be like to fall in there, to swim against the tiny but non-negligible gravity and plunge slowly, magnificently, into the boil of waterborne motes. In his imagination, there was never any pain, only the blissful, light-filled losing of self. So good to be free from the unquiet parliament of selves.

Eight is natural, eight is holy, the Bleyne Shaper Yesger had whispered from behind ornate cloister grilles. Eight arms, eight seasons. Nine must always be unbalanced.

Conscious of each other's too-close company, the guest scholars worked apart with their pupils. Seriantep met daily with Torben in a bulbous chapter house extruded from the mother nest. Tall hexagon-combed windows opened on the steeply downcurving horizons of *Thirty-Third Tranquil Abode*, stippled with the stalactite towers of those Anpreen who refused the lure of the sea. Seriantep flew daily from such a tower down around the curve of the world to alight on Torben's balcony. She wore the same body he had known so well in the Jann Conservatorium, with the addition of a pair of functional wings in her back. She was a vision, she was a marvel, a spiritual creature from the eons-lost motherworld of the Clade: an *angel*. She was beauty, but since arriving in *Thirty Third Tranquil Abode*, Torben had only had sex with her twice. It was not the merman-angel thing, though that was a consideration to metaphor-and-ludicrous-conscious Torben. He didn't love her as Serejen had. She noticed, she commented.

"You're not... the same."

*Neither are you.* What he *said* was, "I know. I couldn't be. Serejen couldn't have lived here. Torben can. Torben is the only one who can." *But for how long, before he splits into his component personalities?*

"Do you remember the way you... he... used to see numbers?"

"Of course I do. And before that, I remember how Ptey used to see numbers. He could look up into the night sky and tell you without counting, just by *knowing*, how many stars there were. He could see numbers. Serejen

could make them do things. For me, Torben; the numbers haven't gone away, I just see them differently. I see them as clearly, as absolutely, but when I see the topospace transformations, I see them as words, as images and stories, as analogies. I can't explain it any better than that."

'I think, no matter how long I try, how long any of us try, we will never understand how your multiple personalities work. To us, you seem a race of partial people, each a genius, a savant, in some strange obsessive way.'

*Are you deliberately trying to punish me?* Torben thought at the flicker-wing angel hovering before the ice-filled windows.

True, he was making colossal intuitive leaps in his twisted, abstruse discipline of spacetime geometry. Not so abstruse: the Anpreen space drives, that Taynish physicists said broke the laws of physics, reached into the elevenspace substrate of the universe to locally stretch or compress the expansion of spacetime—foreshortening ahead of the vehicle, inflating it behind. Thus the lack of any measurable acceleration, it was the entire continuum within and around the shatter-ship that had moved. Snowflakes and loxodromic curves had danced in Torben's imagination: he had it, he had it. The secret of the Anpreen: relativistic interstellar travel, was now open to the peoples of Tay.

The *other* secret of the Anpreen, that was.

For all his epiphanies above the spherical ocean, Torben knew that seminars had changed. The student had become the teacher, the master the pupil. *What is you want from us?* Torben asked himself. *Truly want, truly need?*

"Don't know, don't care. All I know is, if I can find a commercial way to bubble quantum black holes out of elevenspace and tap the evaporation radiation, I'll have more money than God," said Yetger, a squat, physically uncoordinated Oprann islander who relished his countrymen's reputation for boorishness, though Torben found him an affable conversationalist and a refined thinker. "You coming to the Falls on Tennay?"

So they set off across the sky, a little flotilla of physicists with wine and sweet biscuits to dip in it. Those older and less sure of their bodies used little airscooter units. Torben flew. He enjoyed the exercise. The challenge of a totally alien language of movement intrigued him, the fish-tail flex of the flipper-suit. He liked what it was doing to his ass muscles.



The Soujourners'-house's western windows gave distant views of the Falls, but the sense of awe began twenty kilometers out when the thunder and shriek became audible over the constant rumble of sky traffic. The picnic party always flew high, close to the ceiling among the tower roots, so that long vistas would not spoil their pleasure. A dense forest of inverted trees, monster things grown kilometers tall in the nanogee, had been planted around the Falls, green and mist-watered by the spray. The scientists settled on to one of the many platforms sculpted from the boulevard-wide branches. Torben gratefully peeled off his fin-tights, kicked his legs free, and spun to face the Falls.

What you saw, what awed you, depended on how you looked at it. Feet down to the world-sea, head up to the roof, it was a true fall, a cylinder of falling water two hundred meters across and forty kilometers long. Feet up, head down, it was even more terrifying, a titanic geyser. The water was pumped through from the receiving station at near supersonic speeds, where it met the ocean-bead the joined waters boiled and leaped kilometers high, broke into high looping curls and crests and globes, like the fantastical flarings of solar prominences. The roar was terrific. But for the noise-abatement properties of the nanoengineered leaves, it would have meant instant deafness. Torben could feel the tree branch, as massive as any buttress wall of Jann fortress-university, shudder beneath him.

Wine was opened and poured. The biscuits, atavistically hand-baked by Hannaj, one of whose Aspects was a master pastry chef, were dipped into it and savoured. Sweet, the light sharpness of the wine and the salt mist of another world's stolen ocean tanged Torben's tongue.

There were rules to Tennays by the Falls. No work. No theory. No relationships. Five researchers made up a big enough group for family jealousy, small enough for cliquishness. Proper topics of conversation looked homeward; partnerships ended, children born, family successes and sicknesses, gossip, politics, and sports results.

"Oh. Here." Yetger sent a message flake spinning lazily through the air. The Soujourners'-house exfoliated notes and message from home onto slips of whisper-thin paper that peeled from the walls like eczema. The mechanism was poetic but inaccurate; intimate messages unfurled from unintended walls to turn and waft in the strange updrafts that ran through

the nest's convoluted tunnels. It was the worst of forms to read another's message-scurf.

Torben unfolded the rustle of paper. He read it once, blinked, read it again. Then he folded precisely in eight and folded it away in his top pocket.

"Bad news?" For a broad beast of a man, Yetger was acute to emotional subtleties. Torben swallowed.

"Nothing strange or startling."

Then he saw where Belej stared. Her gaze drew his, drew that of everyone in the picnic party. The Falls were failing. Moment by moment, they dwindled, from a deluge to a river, from a river to a stream to a jet, a hiding shrieking thread of water. On all the platforms on all the trees, Anpreen were rising into the air, hovering in swarms, as before their eyes the Falls sputtered and ceased. Drops of water, fat as storms, formed around the lip of the suddenly exposed nozzle to break and drift, quivering, down to the spherical sea. The silence was profound. Then the trees seemed to shower blossoms as the Anpreen took to the air in hosts and choirs, flocking and storming.

Numbers and images flashed in Torben's imagination. The fuelling could not be complete, was weeks from being complete. The ocean would fill the entire interior hollow, the stalactite cities transforming into strange reef communities. Fear gripped him and he felt Fejannen struggle to free himself from the binding into Torben. *I need you here, friend*, Torben said to himself, and saw the others had made the same calculations.

They flew back, a ragged flotilla strung across kilometers of airspace, battling through the ghostly aerial legions of Anpreen. The Soujourners' house was filled with fluttering, gusting message slips shed from the walls. Torben snatched one from the air and against all etiquette read it.

Sajhay are you all right what's happening? Come home, we are all worried about you. Love Mihenj.

The sudden voice of Suguntung, the Anpreen liaison, filled every cell of the nest, an order—polite, but an order—to come to the main viewing lounge, where an important announcement would be made. Torben had long suspected that Suguntung never left the Soujourners' house, merely deliquesced from hominiform into airborne motes, a phase transition.

Beyond the balcony nets, the sky seethed, an apocalypse of insect humanity and storm clouds back as squid ink rolling up around the edge of the world ocean.

“I have grave news,” Suguntung said. He was a grey, sober creature, light and lithe and androgynous, without any salting of wit or humor. “At 12:18 Taynish Enclave time, we detected gravity waves passing through the system. These are consistent with a large numbers of bodies decelerating from relativistic flight.”

Consternation. Voices shouting. Questions questions questions. Suguntung held up a hand and there was quiet.

“On answer to your questions, somewhere in the region of thirty eight thousand objects. We estimate them at a range of seventy astronomical units beyond the edge of the Kuiper belt, decelerating to ten percent lightspeed for system transition.”

“Ninety three hours until they reach us,” Torben said. The numbers, the colored numbers, so beautiful, so distant.

“Yes,” said Suguntung.

“Who are they?” Belej asked.

“I know,” Torben said. “Your enemy.”

“We believe so,” Suguntung answered. “There are characteristic signatures in the gravity waves and the spectral analysis.”

Uproar. By a trick of the motes, Suguntung could raise his voice to a roar that could shout down a crowd of angry physicists.

“The Anpreen Commonweal is making immediate preparations for departure. As a matter of priority, evacuation for all guests and visitors has been arranged and will commence immediately. A transfer ship is already waiting. We are evacuating the system not only for our own protection, but to safeguard you as well. We believe that the Enemy has no quarrel with you.”

“*Believe?*” Yetger spat. “Forgive me if I’m less than completely reassured by that!”

“But you don’t have enough water,” Torben said absently, mazed by the numbers and pictures swimming around in his head, as the message leaves of concern and hope and come-home-soon fluttered around. “How many habitats are fully fueled? Five hundred, five hundred fifty? You

haven't got enough, even this one is at eighty percent capacity. What's going to happen to them?"

"I don't give a fuck what happens to them!" Hannaj had always been the meekest and least assertive of men, brilliant but forever hamstrung by self-doubt. Now, threatened, naked in space, pieced through and through by the gravity waves of an unknowable and power, his anger burned. 'I want to know what's going to happen to *us*.

"We are transferring the intelligences to the interstellar-capable habitats." Suguntung spoke to Torben alone.

"Transferring; you mean copying," Torben said. "And the originals that are left, what happens to them?"

Suguntung made no answer.

Yetger found Torben floating in the exact center of the viewing lounge, moving his tail just enough to maintain him against the microgee.

"Where's your stuff?"

"In my cell."

"The shatter-ship's leaving in an hour."

"I know."

"Well, maybe you should, you know..."

"I'm not going."

"You're *what*?"

"I'm not going, I'm staying here."

"Are you insane?"

"I've talked to Suguntung and Seriantep. It's fine. There are a couple of others on the other habitats."

"You have to come home, we'll need you when they come..."

"Ninety hours and twenty-five minutes to save the world? I don't think so."

"It's home, man."

"It's not. Not since *this*." Torben flicked the folded note of his secret pocket, offered it to Yetger between clenched fingers.

"Oh."

"Yes."

"You're dead. We're all dead, you know that."

“Oh, I know. In the few minutes it takes me to reach wherever the Anpreen Migration goes next, you will have aged and died many times over. I know that, but it’s not home. Not now.”

Yetger ducked his head in sorrow that did not want to be seen, then in a passion hugged Torben hugely to him, kissed him hard.

“Goodbye. Maybe in the next one.”

“No, I don’t think so. One is all we get. And that’s a good enough reason to go out there where none of our people have ever been before, I think.”

“Maybe it is.” Yetger laughed, the kind of laughter that is on the edge of tears. Then he spun and kicked off up through the ceiling door, his duffel of small possessions trailing from his ankle.

For an hour now, he had contemplated the sea and thought that he might just be getting the way of it, the fractal patterns of the ripples, the rhythms and the micro-storms that blew up in squalls and waves that sent globes of water quivering into the air that, just as quickly, were subsumed back into the greater sea. He understood it as music, deeply harmonized. He wished one of his Aspects had a skill for an instrument. Only choirs, vast ensembles, could capture the music of the water bead.

“It’s ready now.”

All the while Torben had calculated the music of the sea, Seriantep had worked on the smart-paper substrate of the Soujourners’-house. Now the poll was complete, a well in the floor of the lounge. *When I leave, will it revert?* Torben thought, the small, trivial wit that fights fear. *Will it go back to whatever it was before, or was it always only just Suguntung?* The slightest of gestures and Seriantep’s wisp-dress fell from her, The floor ate it greedily. Naked and wingless now in this incarnation, she stepped backward into the water, never for an instant taking her eyes from Torben.

“Whenever you’re ready,” she said. “You won’t be hurt.”

She lay back into the receiving water. Her hair floated out around her, coiled and tangled as she came apart. There was nothing ghastly about it, no decay into meat and gut and vile bone, no grinning skeleton fizzing apart in the water like sodium. A brightness, a turning to motes of light. The hair was the last to go. The pool seethed with motes. Torben stepped out of his clothes.

I'm moving on. It's for the best. Maybe not for you. For me. You see, I didn't think I'd mind, but I did. You gave it all up so easily, just like that, off into space. There is someone else. It's Cjatay. I heard what he was saying, and as time went by, as I didn't hear from you, it made sense. I know I'm reacting. I think I owe you that, at least. We're all right together. With him, you get everything, I find I can live with that. I think I like it. I'm sorry Torben, but this is what I want.

The note sifted down through the air like a falling autumn leaf to join the hundreds of others that lay on the floor. Torben's feet kicked up as he stepped down into the water. He gasped at the electrical tingle, then laughed, and, with a great gasp, emptied his lungs and threw himself under the surface. The motes swarmed and began to take him apart. As the *Thirty-Third Tranquil Abode* broke orbit around Tejaphay, the abandoned space elevator coiling like a severed artery, the bottom of the Soujourners'-house opened, and, like a tear, the mingled waters fell to the sea below.

#### Jedden, running

EIGHTY YEARS JEDDEN HAD fallen, dead as a stone, silent as light. Every five years, a few subjective minutes so close to light-speed, he woke up his senses and sent a slush of photons down his wake to see if the hunter was still pursuing.

Redshifted almost to indecipherability, the photons told him, *Yes, still there, still gaining*. Then he shut down his senses, for even that brief wink, that impact of radiation blueshifted to gamma frequencies on the enemy engine field, betrayed him. It was decades since he had risked the scalarity drive. The distortions it left in space-time advertised his position over most of a quadrant. Burn quick, burn hot and fast, get to lightspeed if it meant reducing his reaction mass perilously close to the point where he would not have sufficient ever to brake. Then go dark, run silent and swift, coasting along in high time dilation where years passed in hours.

Between wakings, Jedden dreamed. He dreamed down into the billions of lives, the dozens of races and civilizations that the Anpreen had encountered in their long migration. The depth of their history had stunned Jedden, as if he were swimming and, looking down, discovered beneath

him not the green water of the lagoon but the clear blue drop of the continental shelf. Before they englobed their sun with so many habitats that it became discernible only as a vast infrared glow, before even the wave of expansion that had brought them to that system, before even they became motile, when they wore mere bodies, they had been an extroverted, curious race, eager for the similarities and differences of other subspecies of PanHumanity. Records of the hundreds of societies they had contacted were stored in the spin-states of the quantum-ice flake that comprised the soul of Jedden. Cultures, customs, ways of being human were simulated in such detail that, if he wished, Jedden could have spend eons living out their simulated lives. Even before they had reached the long-reprocessed moon of their homeworld, the Anpreen had encountered a light-sail probe of the Ekkad, three hundred years out on a millennium-long survey of potential colony worlds. As they converted their asteroid belts into habitat rings, they had fought a savage war for control of the high country against the Okranda asteroid colonies that had dwelled there, hidden and unsuspected, for twenty thousand years. The doomed Okranda had, as a final, spiteful act, seared the Anpreen homeworld to the bedrock, but not before the Anpreen had absorbed and recorded the beautiful, insanely complex hierarchy of caste, classes, and societies that had evolved in the baroque cavities of the sculpted asteroids. Radio transmission had drawn them out of their Oort cloud across two hundred light-years to encounter the dazzling society of the Jad. From them, the Anpreen had learned the technology that enabled them to pload themselves into free-flying nanomotes and become a true Level Two civilization.

People and beasts, machines and woods, architectures and moralities, and stories beyond counting. Among the paraphernalia and marginalia of a hundred races, were the ones who had destroyed the Anpreen, who were now hunting Jedden down over all the long years, closing meter by meter.

So he spent hours and years immersed in the great annual eisteddfod of the Barrant-Hoj, where one of the early generation of seed ships (early in that it was seed of the seed of the seed of the first flowering of mythical Earth) had been drawn into the embrace of a fat, slow hydrocarbon-rich gas giant and birthed a brilliant, brittle airborne culture, where blimp-cities rode the edge of storms wide enough to drown whole planets and the songs of the contestants—gas-bag-spider creatures huge as reefs, fragile as

honeycomb—belled in infrasonic wavefronts kilometers between crests and changed entire climates. It took Barrant-Hoj two hominiform lifetimes to circle its sun—the Anpreen had chanced upon the song-spiel, preserved it, hauled it out of the prison of gas giant’s gravity well, and given it to greater Clade.

Jedden blinked back into interstellar flight. He felt—he imagined—tears on his face as the harmonies reverberated within him. Cantos could last days, chorales entire weeks. Lost in music. A moment of revulsion at his body, this sharp, unyielding thing of ice and energies. The hunter’s ramscoop fusion engine advertised its presence across a thousand cubic light-years. It was inelegant and initially slow, but, unlike Jedden’s scalarity drive, was light and could live off the land. The hunter would be, like Jedden, a ghost of a soul impressed on a Bose-condensate quantum chip, a mote of sentience balanced on top of a giant drive unit. The hunter was closing, but was no closer than Jedden had calculated. Only miscalculation could kill you in interstellar war. The equations were hard but they were fair.

Two hundred three years to the joke point. It would be close, maybe close enough for the enemy’s greed to blind him. Miscalculation and self-deception, these were the killers in space. And luck. Two centuries. Time enough for a few moments rest.

Among all the worlds was one he had never dared visit: the soft blue tear of Tay. There, in the superposed spin states, were all the lives he could have led. The lovers, the children, the friends and joys and mudanities. Puzhay was there, Cjatay too. He could make of them anything he wanted: Puzhay faithful, Cjatay Manifold, no longer Lonely.

Lonely. He understood that now, eighty light-years out and decades to go before he could rest.

Extraordinary how painless it had been. Even as the cells of Torben’s body were invaded by the motes into which Seriantep had dissolved, even as they took him apart and rebuilt him, even as they read and copied his neural mappings, there was never a moment where fleshly Torben blinked out and nanotechnological Torben winked in, there was no pain. Never pain, only a sense of wonder, of potential racing away to infinity on every side, of a new birth—or, it seemed to him, an anti-birth, a return to the primal, salted



waters. As the globe of mingled motes dropped slow and quivering and full as a breast toward the world-ocean, Torben still thought of himself as Torben, as a man, an individual, as a body. Then they hit and burst and dissolved into the sea of seething motes, and voices and selves and memories and personalities rushed in on him from every side, clamoring, a sea-roar. Every life in every detail. Senses beyond his native five brought him impression upon impression upon impression. Here was intimacy beyond anything he had ever known with Seriantep. As he communed, he was communed with. He knew that the Anpreen government—now he understood the reason for the protracted and ungainly negotiations with Tay: the two representations had almost no points of communication—were unwrapping him to construct a deep map of Tay and its people—rather, the life and Aspects of one under-socialized physics researcher. Music. All was music. As he understood this, Anpreen Commonweal Habitat *Thirty Third Tranquil Abode*, with its five hundred eighty two companions, crossed one hundred nineteen light-years to the Milius 1183 star system.

One hundred nineteen light-years, eight months subjective, in which Torben Reris Orhum Fejannan Kekjay Prus Rejmer Serejen Nejben ceased to exist. In the mote-swarm, time, like identity, could be anything you assigned it to be. To the self now known as Jedden, it seemed that he had spent twenty years of re-subjectivized time in which he had grown to be a profound and original thinker in the Commonweal's physics community. Anpreen life had only enhanced his instinctive ability to see and apprehend number. His insights and contributions were startling and creative. Thus it had been a pure formality for him to request a splinter-ship to be spun off from *Thirty Third Tranquil Abode* as the fleet entered the system and dropped from relativistic flight at the edge of the Oort cloud. A big fat splinter ship with lots of fuel to explore space-time topological distortions implicit in the orbital perturbations of inner Kuiper Belt cubewanos for a year, a decade, a century, and then come home.

So he missed the annihilation.

Miscalculation kills. Lack of circumspection kills. Blind assumption kills. The Enemy had planned their trap centuries ahead. The assault on the Tay system had been a diversion; the thirty eight thousand drive signatures mostly decoys; propulsion units and guidance systems and little else scattered among a handful of true battleships dozens of kilometers long.

Even as lumbering, barely mobile Anpreen habitats and Enemy attack drones burst across Tay's skies, so bright they even illuminated the sunglow of high summer, the main fleet was working around Milius 1183. A work of decades, year upon year of slow modifications, staggering energies, careful careful concealment and camouflage, as the Enemy sent their killing hammer out on its long slow loop.

Blind assumption. The Anpreen saw a small red sun at affordable range to the ill equipped fleet. They saw there was water there, water; worlds of water to re-equip the Commonwealth and take it fast and far beyond the reach of the Enemy in the great star clouds that masked the galactic core. In their haste, they failed to note that Milius 1183 was a binary system, a tired red dwarf star and a companion neutron star in photosphere-grazing eight hour orbit. Much less then did they notice that the neutron star was missing.

The trap was perfect and complete. The Enemy had predicted perfectly. Their setup was flawless. The hunting fleet withdrew to the edges of system, all that remained were the relays and autonomous devices. Blindsided by sunglare, the Anpreen sensoria had only milliseconds of warning before the neutron star impacted Milius 1183 at eight percent light speed.

The nova would in time be visible over a light-century radius. Within its spectrum, careful astronomers might note the dark lines of hydrogen, oxygen, and smears of carbon. Habitats blew away in sprays of plasma. The handful of stragglers that survived battled to reconstruct their mobility and life support systems. Shark-ships hidden half a century before in the rubble of asteroid belts and planetary ring systems woke from their long sleeps and went a-hunting.

Alone in his splinter ship in the deep dark, Jedden, his thoughts outward to the fabric of space-time and at the same time inward to the beauty of number, the song within him, saw the system suddenly turn white with death light. He heard five hundred billion sentients die. All of them, all at once, all their voices and hearts. He heard Seriantep die, he heard those other Taynish die, those who had turned away from their home world in the hope of knowledge and experience beyond anything their world could offer. Every life he had ever touched, that had ever been part of him, that had shared number or song or intimacy beyond fleshly sex. He heard the death

of the Anpreen migration. Then he was alone. Jedden went dark for fifty years. He contemplated the annihilation of the last of the Anpreen. He drew up escape plans. He waited. Fifty years was enough. He lit the scalarity drive. Space-time stretched. Behind him, he caught the radiation signature of a fusion drive igniting and the corresponding electromagnetic flicker of a scoopfield going up. Fifty years was not enough.

That would be his last miscalculation.

Twenty years to bend his course away from Tay. Another ten to set up the deception. *As you deceived us, so I will fool you*, Jedden thought as he tacked ever closer to lightspeed. *And with the same device, a neutron star.*

Jedden awoke from the sleep that was beyond dreams, a whisper away from death, that only disembodied intelligences can attain. The magnetic vortex of the hunter's scoopfield filled half the sky. Less than a light-minute separated them. Within the next ten objective years, the Enemy ship would overtake and destroy Jedden. Not with physical weapons or even directed energy, but with information: skullware and dark phages that would dissolve him into nothingness or worse, isolate him from any external sense or contact, trapped in unending silent, nerveless darkness.

The moment, when it came, after ninety light-years, was too fine-grained for hominiform intelligence. Jedden's sub-routines, the autonomic responses that controlled the ship that was his body, opened the scalarity drive and summoned the dark energy. Almost instantly, the Enemy responded to the course change, but that tiny relativistic shift, the failure of simultaneity, was Jedden's escape and life.

Among the memories frozen into the heart of the Bose-Einstein condensate were the star-logs of the Cush Né, a fellow migrant race the Anpreen had encountered—by chance, as all such meets must be—in the big cold between stars. Their star maps charted a rogue star, a neutron dwarf ejected from its stellar system and wandering dark and silent, almost invisible, through deep space. Decades ago, when he felt the enemy ramfield go up and knew that he had not escaped, Jedden had made the choice and the calculations. Now he turned his flight, a prayer short of light-speed, toward the wandering star.

Jedden had long ago abolished fear. Yet he experienced a strange psychosomatic sensation in that part of the splinter-ship that corresponded

to his testicles. Balls tightening. The angle of insertion was so precise that Jedden had had to calculate the impact of stray hydroxyl radicals on his ablation field. One error would send him at relativistic speed head on into a neutron star. But he did not doubt his ability, he did not fear, and now he understood what the sensation in his phantom testicles was. Excitement.

The neutron star was invisible, would always be invisible, but Jedden could feel its gravity in every part of his body, a quaking, quailing shudder, a music of a hundred harmonies as different parts of the smart-ice hit their resonant frequencies. A chorale in ice and adrenaline, he plunged around the neutron star. He could hope that the hunting ship would not survive the passage, but the Enemy, however voracious, was surely never so stupid as to run a scoop ship through a neutron's star terrifying magnetic terrain with the drive field up. That was not his strategy anyway. Jedden was playing the angles. Whipping tight around the intense gravity well, even a few seconds of slowness would amplify into light-years of distance, decades of lost time. Destruction would have felt like a cheat. Jedden wanted to win by geometry. By calculation, we live.

He allowed himself one tiny flicker of a communication laser. Yes. The Enemy was coming. Coming hard, coming fast, coming wrong. Tides tore at Jedden, every molecule of his smart-ice body croaked and moaned, but his own cry rang louder and he sling-shotted around the neutron star. *Yes!* Before him was empty space. The splinter-ship would never fall of its own accord into another gravity well. He lacked sufficient reaction mass to enter any Clade system. Perhaps the Enemy had calculated this in the moments before he too entered the neutron star's transit. An assumption. In space, assumptions kill. Deep in his quantum memories, Jedden knew what was out there. The slow way home.

### **Fast Man, slowly**

KITES, BANNERS, PENNANTS, and streamers painted with the scales and heads of ritual snakes flew from the sun rigging on the Festival of Fast Children. At the last minute, the climate people had received budgetary permission to shift the prevailing winds lower. The Clave had argued that the Festival of

Fast Children seemed to come round every month and a half, which it did, but the old and slow said, *not to the children it doesn't*.

Fast Man turned off the dust road on to the farm track. The wooden gate was carved with the pop-eyed, O-mouthed hearth-gods, the chubby, venal guardians of agricultural Yoe Canton. As he slowed to Parent Speed, the nodding heads of the meadow flowers lifted to a steady metronome tick. The wind-rippled grass became a restless choppy sea of current and cross-currents. Above him, the clouds raced down the face of the sun-rod that ran the length of the environment cylinder, and in the wide yard before the frowning eaves of the ancient earthen manor, the children, preparing for the ritual Beating of the Sun-lines, became plumes of dust.

For three days, he had walked up the eternal hill of the cylinder curve, through the tended red forests of Canton Ahaea. Fast Man liked to walk. He walked at Child-Speed and they would loop around him on their bicycles and ped-cars and then pull away shouting, you're not so fast, Fast Man! He could have caught them, of course, he could have easily outpaced them. They knew that, they knew he could on a wish take the form of a bird, or a cloud, and fly away from them up to the ends of the world. Everyone in the Three Worlds knew Fast Man. He needed neither sleep nor food, but he enjoyed the taste of the highly seasoned, vegetable-based cuisine of the Middle Cantons and their light but fragrant beer, so he would call each night at a hostel or township pub. Then he would drop down into Parent Speed and talk with the locals. Children were fresh and bright and inquiring, but for proper conversation, you needed adults.

The chirping cries of the children rang around the grassy eaves of Toe Yau Manor. The community had gathered, among them the Toe Yau's youngest, a skipping five-year-old. In her own speed, that was. She was months old to her parents; her birth still a fresh and painful memory. The oldest, the one he had come about, was in his early teens. Noha and Jehau greeted Fast Man with water and bread.

"God save all here," Fast Man blessed them. Little Nemaha flickered around him like summer evening bugs. He heard his dual-speech unit translate the greeting into Children-Speech in a chip of sound. This was his talent and his fame; that his mind and words could work in two times at once. He was the generational ambassador to three worlds.

The three great cylinders of the Aeo Taea colony fleet were fifty Adult Years along in their journey to the star Sulpees 2157 in the Anpreen categorization. A sweet little golden star with a gas giant pressed up tight to it, and, around that gas world, a sun-warmed, tear-blue planet. Their big, slow lathe-sculpted asteroids, two hundred kilometers long, forty across their flats, had appeared as three small contacts at the extreme edge of the Commonweal's sensory array. Too far from their flightpath to the Tay system and, truth be told, too insignificant. The galaxy was festering with little subspecies, many of them grossly ignorant that they were part of an immeasurably more vast and glorious Clade, all furiously engaged on their own grand little projects and empires. Races became significant when they could push lightspeed. Ethnologists had noted as a point of curiosity a peculiar time distortion to the signals, as if everything had been slowed to a tenth normal speed. Astrogators had put it down to an unseen gravitational lensing effect and noted course and velocity of the lumbering junk as possible navigation hazards.

That idle curiosity, that moment of fastidiousness of a now-dead, now-vaporized Anpreen who might otherwise have dismissed it, had saved Jedden. There had always been more hope than certainty in the mad plan he had concocted as he watched the Anpreen civilization end in nova light. Hope as he opened up the dark energy that warped space-time in calculations made centuries before that would only bear fruit centuries to come. Hope as he woke up, year upon year in the long flight to the stray neutron star, always attended by doubt. The slightest miscalculation could throw him off by light-years and centuries. He himself could not die, but his reaction mass was all too mortal. Falling forever between stars was worse than any death. He could have abolished that doubt with a thought, but so would the hope have been erased to become mere blind certainty.

Hoping and doubting, he flew out from the slingshot around the neutron star.

Because he could hope, he could weep; smart-ice tears when his long range radars returned three slow-moving images less than five light-hours from the position he had computed. As he turned the last of his reaction mass into dark energy to match his velocity with the Aeo Taea armada, a stray calculation crossed his consciousness. In all his redefinitions and reformations, he had never given up the ability to see numbers, to hear what

they whispered to him. He was half a millennium away from the lives he had known on Tay.

For ten days, he broadcast his distress call. *Help, I am a refugee from a star war.* He knew that, in space, there was no rule of the sea, as there had been on Tay's world ocean, no Aspects at once generous, stern, and gallant that had been known as SeaSelves. The Aeo Taea could still kill him with negligence. But he could sweeten them with a bribe.

Like many of the country houses of Amoa ark, Toe Yau Manor featured a wooden belvedere, this one situated on a knoll two fields spinward from the old house. Airy and gracious, woven from genetweak willow plaits, it and its country cousins all across Amoa's Cantons had become a place for Adults, where they could mix with ones of their own speed, talk without the need for the hated speech convertors around their necks, gripe and moan and generally gossip, and, through the central roof iris, spy through the telescope on their counterparts on the other side of the world. Telescope parties were the latest excuse for Parents to get together and complain about their children.

But this was their day—though it seemed like a week to them—the Festival of Fast Children, and this day Noha Toe Yau had his telescope trained not on his counterpart beyond the sun, but on the climbing teams fizzing around the sun-riggings, tens of kilometers above the ground, running out huge monoweave banners and fighting ferocious kite battles high where the air was thin.

"I tell you something, no child of mine would ever be let do so damn fool a thing," Noha Toe Yau grumbled. "I'll be surprised if any of them make it to the Destination."

Fast Man smiled, for he knew that he had only been called because Yemoa Toe Yau was doing something much more dangerous.

Jehau Toe Yau poured chocolate, thick and cooling and vaguely hallucinogenic.

"As long as he's back before Starship Day," she said. She frowned down at the wide green before the manor where the gathered Fast Children of the neighborhood in their robes and fancies were now hurtling around the long trestles of festival foods. They seemed to be engaged in a high-velocity food fight. "You know, I'm sure they're speeding the days up. Not much,

just a little every day, but definitely speeding them up. Time goes nowhere these days.”

Despite a surprisingly sophisticated matter-anti-matter propulsion system, the Aeo Taea fleet was limited to no more than ten percent of lightspeed, far below the threshold where time dilation became perceptible. The crossing to the Destination—Aeo Taea was a language naturally given to Portentous Capitalizations, Fast Man had discovered—could only be made by generation ship. The Aeo Taea had contrived to do it in just one generation. The strangely slow messages the Anpreen had picked up from the fleet were no fluke of space-time distortion. The voyagers’ bodies, their brains, their perceptions and metabolisms, had been in-vitro engineered to run at one-tenth hominiform normal. Canned off from the universe, the interior lighting, the gentle spin gravity and the slow, wispy climate easily adjusted to a life lived at a snail’s pace. Morning greetings lasted hours, that morning a world-week. Seasons endured for what would have been years in the outside universe, vast languorous autumns. The three hundred fifty years of the crossing would pass in the span of an average working career. Amoa was a world of the middle aged.

Then Fast Man arrived and changed everything.

“Did he give any idea where he was going?” Fast Man asked. It was always the boys. Girls worked it through, girls could see further.

Jehau pointed down. Fast Man sighed. Rebellion was limited in Amoa, where any direction you ran lead you swiftly back to your own doorstep. The wires that rigged the long sun could take you high, kilometers above it all in your grand indignation. Everyone would watch you through their telescopes, up there high and huffing, until you got hungry and wet and bored and had to come down again. In Amoa, the young soul rebels went *out*.

Fast Man set down his chocolate glass and began the subtle exercise that reconfigured the motes of his malleable body. To the Toe Yaus, he seemed to effervesce slightly, a sparkle like fine silver talc or the dust from a moth’s wings. Jehau’s eyes widened. All the three worlds knew of Fast Man, who had brought the end of the Journey suddenly within sight, soothed generational squabbles, and found errant children—and so everyone though they knew him personally. Truly, he was an alien.



“It would help considerably if they left some idea of where they were going,” Fast Man said. “There’s a lot of space out there. Oh well. I’d stand back a little, by the way.” He stood up, opened his arms in a little piece of theatre, and exploded into a swarm of motes. He towered to a buzzing cylinder that rose from the iris at the center of the belvedere. *See this through your telescopes on the other side of the world and gossip.* Then, in a thought, he speared into the earth and vanished.

In the end, the Fast Boy was pretty much where Fast Man reckoned he would be. He came speed-walking up through the salt-dead cityscape of the communications gear just above the convex flaring of the drive shield, and there he was, nova-bright in Fast man’s radar sight. A sweet, neat little cranny in the main dish gantry with a fine view over the construction site. Boys and building. His complaining to the Toe Yaus had been part of the curmudgeonly image he liked to project. Boys were predictable things.

“Are you not getting a bit cold up there?” Fast Man said. Yemoa started at the voice crackling in his helmet phones. He looked around, helmet tilting from side to side as he tried to pick the interloper out of the limitless shadow of interstellar space. Fast Man increased his surface radiance. He knew well how he must seem: a glowing man, naked to space, toes firmly planted on the pumice-dusted hull and leaning slightly forward against the spin force. He would have terrified himself at that age, but awe worked for the Fast Children as amiable curmudgeon worked for their slow parents.

“Go away.”

Fast Man’s body-shine illuminated the secret roots. Yemoa Toe Yau was spindly even in the tight yellow and green pressure skin. He shuffled around to turn his back; a deadlier insult among the Aeo Taea than among the Aspects of Tay for all their diverse etiquettes. Fast Man tugged at the boy’s safety lanyard. The webbing was unfrayed, the carabiner latch operable.

“Leave that alone.”

“You don’t want to put too much faith in those things. Cosmic rays can weaken the structure of the plastic: put any tension on them, and they snap just like that, just when you need them most. Yes sir, I’ve seen people just go sailing out there, right away out there.”

The helmet, decorated with bright bird motifs, turned toward Fast Man.

“You’re just saying that.”

Fast Man swung himself up beside the runaway and settled into the little nest. Yemoa wiggled away as far as the cramped space would permit.

“I didn’t say you could come up here.”

“It’s a free ship.”

“It’s not *your* ship.”

“True,” said Fast Man. He crossed his legs and dimmed down his self-shine until they could both look out over the floodlit curve of the star drive works. The scalarity drive itself was a small unit—small by Amoa’s vistas; merely the size of a well-established country manor. The heavy engineering that overshadowed it, the towering silos and domes and pipeworks, was the transfer system that converted water and anti-water into dark energy. Above all, the lampships hovered in habitat-stationary orbits, five small suns. Fast Man did not doubt that the site hived with desperate energy and activity, but to his Child Speed perceptions, it was as still as a painting, the figures in their bird-bright skinsuits, the heavy engineers in their long-duration work armor, the many robots and vehicles and little jetting skipcraft all frozen in time, moving so slowly that no individual motion was visible, but when you looked back, everything had changed. A long time even for a Parent, Fast Man sat with Yemoa. Beyond the construction lights, the stars arced past. How must they seem to the adults, Fast Man thought, and in that thought pushed down into Parent Speed and felt a breathless, deeply internalized gasp of wonder as the stars accelerated into curving streaks. The construction site ramped up into action; the little assembly robots and skippers darting here and there on little puffs of reaction gas.

Ten years, ten grown-up years, since Fast Man had osmosed through the hull and coalesced out of a column of motes on to the soil of Ga’atu Colony, and still he did not know which world he belonged to, Parent or Fast Children. There had been no Fast Children then, no children at all. That was the contract. When the Destination was reached, that was the time for children, born the old way, the fast way, properly adjusted to their new world. Fast Man had changed all that with the price of his rescue: the promise that the Destination could be reached not in slow years, not even in a slow season, but in hours; real hours. With a proviso; that they detour—a

matter of moments to a relativistic fleet—to Fast Man’s old homeworld of Tay.

The meetings were concluded, the deal was struck, the Aeo Taea fleet’s tight tight energy budget would allow it, just. It would mean biofuels and muscle power for the travelers; all tech resources diverted to assembling the three dark energy scalarity units. But the journey would be over in a single sleep. Then the generous forests and woodlands that carpeted the gently rolling midriffs of the colony cylinders all flowered and released genetweak pollen. Everyone got a cold for three days, everyone got pregnant, and nine Parent months later, the first of the Fast Children was born.

“So where’s your clip?”

At the sound of Yemoa’s voice, Fast Man geared up into Child Speed. The work on the dazzling plain froze, the stars slowed to a crawl.

“I don’t need one, do I?” Fast Man added, “I know exactly how big space is.”

“Does it really use dark energy?”

“It does.”

Yemoa pulled his knees up to him, stiff from his long vigil in the absolute cold. A splinter of memory pierced Fast Man: the fast-frozen canals of Jann, the months-long dark. He shivered. Whose life was that, whose memory?

“I read about dark energy. It’s the force that makes the universe expand faster and faster, and everything in it, you, me, the distance between us. In the end, everything will accelerate away so fast from everything else that the universe will rip itself apart, right down to the quarks.”

“That’s one theory.”

“Every particle will be so far from everything else that it will be in a universe of its own. It will *be* a universe of its own.”

“Like I said, it’s a theory. Yemoa, your parents...”

“You use this as a space drive.”

“Your matter/anti-matter system obeys the laws of Thermodynamics, and that’s the heat-death of the universe. We’re all getting older and colder and more and more distant. Come on, you have to come in. You must be uncomfortable in that suit.”

The Aeo Taea skinsuits looked like flimsy dance costumes to don in the empty cold of interstellar space but their hides were clever works of molecular technology, recycling and refreshing and repairing. Still, Fast Man could not contemplate the itch and reek of one after days of wear.

“You can’t be here on Starship Day,” Fast Man warned. “Particle density is very low out here, but it’s still enough to fry you, at lightspeed.”

“We’ll be the Slow ones then,” Yemoa said. “A few hours will pass for us, but in the outside universe, it will be fifty years.”

“It’s all relative,” Fast Man said.

“And when we get there,” Yemoa continued, “we’ll unpack the landers and we’ll go down and it’ll be the new world, the big Des Tin Ay Shun, but our Moms and Dads, they’ll stay up in the Three Worlds. And we’ll work, and we’ll build that new world, and we’ll have our children, and they’ll have children, and maybe we’ll see another generation after that, but in the end, we’ll die, and the Parents up there in the sky, they’ll hardly have aged at all.”

Fast Man draped his hands over his knees.

“They love you, you know.”

“I know. I know that. It’s not that at all. Did you think that? If you think that, you’re stupid. What does everyone see in you if you think stuff like that? It’s just... what’s the point?”

None, Fast Man thought. And everything. You are as much point as the universe needs, in your yellow and green skinsuit and mad-bird helmet and fine rage.

“You know,” Fast Man said, “whatever you think about it, it’s worse for them. It’s worse than anything I think you can imagine. Everyone they love growing old in the wink of an eye, dying, and they can’t touch them, they can’t help, they’re trapped up there. No, I think it’s so very much worse for them.”

“Yah,” said Yemoa. He slapped his gloved hands on his thin knees. “You know, it is freezing up here.”

“Come on then.” Fast Man stood up and offered a silver hand. Yemoa took it. The stars curved overhead. Together, they climbed down from the aerial and walked back down over the curve of the world, back home.

## Oga, tearing

HE STOOD ON THE ARCH of the old Jemejnay bridge over the dead canal. Acid winds blew past him, shrieking on the honed edges of the shattered porcelain houses. The black sky crawled with suppressed lightning. The canal was a dessicated vein, cracked dry, even the centuries of trash wedged in its cracked silts had rusted away, under the bite of the caustic wind, to scabs and scales of slag. The lagoon was a dish of pure salt shimmering with heat haze. In natural light, it would have been blinding but no sun ever challenged the clouds. In Oga's extended vision, the old campanile across the lagoon was a snapped tooth of crumbling masonry.

A flurry of boiling acid rain swept over Oga as he turned away from the burning vista from the dead stone arch on to Ejtay Quay. His motes sensed and changed mode on reflex, but not before a wash of pain burned through him. Feel it. It is punishment. It is good.

The houses were roofless, floorless; rotted snapped teeth of patinated ceramic: had been for eight hundred years. Drunken Chicken Street. Here Kentlay the Lonely had sat out in the sun and passed the time of day with his neighbors and visitors come for his gift. Here were the Dilmajs and the vile, cruel little son who had caught birds and pulled their feathers so that they could not fly from his needles and knives, street bully and fat boy. Mrs. Supris, a sea-widow, a baker of cakes and sweets, a keeper of mournings and ocean-leavings. All dead. Long dead, dead with their city, their world.

This must be a mock Ctarisphay, a stage, a set, a play-city for some moral tale of a prodigal, an abandoner. A traitor. Memories turned to blasted, glowing stumps. A city of ruins. A world in ruins. There was no sea any more. Only endless poisoned salt. This could not be true. Yet this was his house. The acid wind had not yet totally erased the carved squid that stood over the door. Oga reached up to touch. It was hot, biting hot; everything was hot, baked to an infrared glow by runaway greenhouse effect. To Oga's carbon-shelled fingertips, it was a small stone prayer, a whisper caught in a shell. If the world had permitted tears, the old, eroded stone squid would have called Oga's. Here was the hall, here the private parlor, curved in on itself like a ceramic musical instrument. The stairs, the upper floors, everything organic had evaporated centuries ago, but he could

still read the niches of the sleeping porches cast in the upper walls. How would it have been in the end days, when even the summer sky was black from burning oil? Slow, painful, as year upon year the summer temperatures rose and the plankton blooms, carefully engineered to absorb the carbon from Tay's oil-riches, died and gave up their own sequestered carbon.

The winds keened through the dead city and out across the empty ocean. With a thought, Oga summoned the ship. Ion glow from the re-entry shone through the clouds. Sonic booms rolled across the sterile lagoon and rang from the dead porcelain houses. The ship punched out of the cloud base and unfolded, a sheet of nano motes that, to Oga's vision, called memories of the ancient Bazjendi angels stooping down the burning wind. The ship beats its wings over the shattered campanile, then dropped around Oga like possession. Flesh melted, flesh ran and fused, systems meshed, selves merged. Newly incarnate, Oga kicked off from Ejtay Quay in a pillar of fusion fire. Light broke around the empty houses and plazas, sent shadows racing down the desiccated canals. The salt pan glared white, dwindling to the greater darkness as the light ascended. With a star at his feet, Oga punched up through the boiling acid clouds, up and out until, in his extended shipsight, he could see the infra-glow of the planet's limb curve against space. A tear of blood. Accelerating, Oga broke orbit.

Oga. The name was a festival. Father-of-all-our-Mirths, in subtly inflected Aeo Taea. He was Fast Man no more, no longer a sojourner; he was Parent of a nation. The Clave had ordained three Parent Days of rejoicing as the Aeo Taea colony cylinders dropped out of scalarity drive at the edge of the system. For the children, it had been a month of party. Looking up from the flat end of the cylinder, Oga had felt the light from his native star on his skin, subtle and sensitive in a dozen spectra. He masked out the sun and looked for those sparks of reflected light that were worlds. There Saltpeer, and great Bephis: magnifying his vision, he could see its rings and many moons; there Tejaphay. It too wore a ring now; the shattered icy remnants of the Anpreen Commonweal. And there; there: Tay. Home. Something not right about it. Something missing in its light. Oga had ratcheted up his sight to the highest magnification he could achieve in this form.

There was no water in the spectrum. There was no pale blue dot.

The Clave of Aeo Taea Interstellar Cantons received the message some hours after the surface crews registered the departure of the Anpreen splinter ship in a glare of fusion light: *I have to go home.*

From five A.U.s out, the story became brutally evident. Tay was a silver ball of unbroken cloud. Those clouds comprised carbon dioxide, carbonic, and sulphuric acid and a memory of water vapor. The surface temperature read at two hundred twenty degrees. Oga's ship-self possessed skills and techniques beyond his hominiform self; he could see the perpetual lighting storms cracking cloud to cloud, but never a drop of pure rain. He could see through those clouds, he could peel them away so that the charred, parched surface of the planet lay open to his sight. He could map the outlines of the continents and the continental shelves lifting from the dried ocean. The chains of archipelagos, once jewels around the belly of a beautiful dancer, were ribs, bones, stark mountain chains glowing furiously in the infra-dark.

As he fell sunward, Oga put the story together. The Enemy had struck Tay casually, almost as an afterthought. A lone warship, little larger than the ritual catamaran on which the boy called Ptey had sailed from this quay so many centuries before, had detached itself from the main fleet action and swept the planet with its particle weapons, a spray of directed fire that set the oil fields burning. Then it looped carelessly back out of the system, leaving a world to suffocate. They had left the space elevator intact. There must be a way out. This was judgment, not murder. Yet two billion people, two thirds of the planet's population, had died.

One third had lived. One third swarmed up the life-rope of the space elevator and looked out at space and wondered where they could go. Where they went, Oga went now. He could hear their voices, a low em-band chitter from the big blue of Tejaphay. His was a long, slow chasing loop. It would be the better part of a year before he arrived in parking orbit above Tejaphay. Time presented its own distractions and seductions. The quantum array that was his heart could as easily recreate Tay as any of scores of cultures it stored. The midday aurora would twist and glimmer again above the steep-gabled roofs of Jann. He would fish with Cjatay from the old, weather-silvered fishing stands for the spring run of prith. The Sulanj islands would simmer and bask under the midnight sun and Puzhay would again nuzzle against him and press her body close against the hammering

cold outside the Tea Lane Womenhearth walls. They all could live, they all would believe they lived, he could, by selective editing of his consciousness, believe they lived again. He could recreate dead Tay. But it was the game of a god, a god who could take off his omniscience and enter his own delusion, and so Oga chose to press his perception down into a time flow even slower than Parent Time and watch the interplay of gravity wells around the sun.

On the final weeks of approach, Oga returned to world time and opened his full sensory array on the big planet that hung tantalizingly before him. He had come here before, when the Anpreen Commonweal hung around Tejaphay like pearls, but then he had given the world beneath him no thought, being inside a world complete in itself and his curiosity turned outward to the shape of the universe. Now he beheld Tejaphay and remembered awe. Three times the diameter of Tay, Tejaphay was the true water world now. Ocean covered it pole to pole, a hundred kilometers deep. Immense weather systems mottled the planet, white on blue. The surviving spine of the Anpreen space elevator pierced the eye of a perpetual equatorial storm system. Wave trains and swells ran unbroken from equator to pole to smash in stupendous breakers against the polar ice caps. Oga drew near in sea meditation. Deep ocean appalled him in a way that centuries of time and space had not. That was distance. This was hostility. This was elementary fury that knew nothing of humanity.

Yet life clung here. Life survived. From two light minutes out, Oga had heard a whisper of radio communication, from the orbit station on the space elevator, also from the planet's surface. Scanning sub Antarctic waters, he caught the unmistakable tang of smart ice. A closer look: What had on first glance seemed to be bergs revealed a more complex structure. Spires, buttresses, domes, and sprawling terraces. Ice cities, riding the perpetual swell. Tay was not forgotten: these were the ancient Manifold Houses reborn, grown to the scale of vast Tejaphay. Closer again: The berg city under his scrutiny floated at the center of a much larger boomed circle. Oga's senses teemed with life-signs. This was a complete ecosystem, and ocean farm, and Oga began to appreciate what these refugees had undertaken. No glimpse of life had ever been found on Tejaphay. Waterworlds, thawed from ice-giants sent spiraling sunward by the gravitational play of their larger planetary rivals, were sterile. At the bottom



of the hundred-kilometer-deep ocean, was pressure ice, five thousand kilometers of pressure ice down to the iron core. No minerals, no carbon ever percolated up through that deep ice. Traces might arrive by cometary impact, but the waters of Tejaphay were deep and pure. What the Taynish had, the Taynish had brought. Even this ice city was grown from the shattered remnants of the Anpreen Commonweal.

A hail from the elevator station, a simple language algorithm. Oga smiled to himself as he compared the vocabulary files to his own memory of his native tongue. Half a millennium had changed the pronunciation and many of the words of Taynish, but not its inner subtleties, the rhythmic and contextual clues as to which Aspect was speaking.

“Attention unidentified ship, this is Tejaphay orbital Tower approach control. Please identify yourself and your flight plan.”

“This is the Oga of the Aeo Taea Interstellar Fleet.” He toyed with replying in the archaic speech. Worse than a breach of etiquette, such a conceit might give away information he did not wish known. Yet. “I am a representative with authority to negotiate. We wish to enter into communications with your government regarding fuelling rights in this system.”

“Hello, Oga, this is Tejaphay Orbital Tower. By the Aeo Taea Interstellar Fleet, I assume you refer to these objects.” A sub-chatter on the data channel identified the cylinders, coasting in-system. Oga confirmed.

“Hello, Oga, Tejaphay Tower. Do not, repeat, do not approach the tower docking station. Attain this orbit and maintain until you have been contacted by Tower security. Please confirm your acceptance.”

It was a reasonable request, and Oga’s subtler senses picked up missile forams unfolding in the shadows of the Orbital Station solar array. He was a runner, not a fighter; Tejaphay’s defenses might be basic fusion warheads and would need sustained precision hits to split open the Aeo Taea colony cans, but they were more than a match for Oga without the fuel reserves for full scalarity drive.

“I confirm that.”

As he looped up to the higher ground, Oga studied more closely the berg cities of Tejaphay, chips of ice in the monstrous ocean. It would be a brutal life down there under two gravities, every aspect of life subject to the melting ice and the enclosing circle of the biosphere boom. Everything

beyond that was as lifeless as space. The horizon would be huge and far and empty. City ships might sail for lifetimes without meeting another polis. The Taynish were tough. They were a race of the extremes. Their birthworld and its severe seasonal shifts had called forth a social response that other cultures would regard as mental disease, as socialized schizophrenia. Those multiple Aspects—a self for every need—now served them on the hostile vastnesses of Tejaphay’s world ocean. They would survive, they would thrive. Life endured. This was the great lesson of the Clade: that life was hope, the only hope of escaping the death of the universe.

*“Every particle will be so far from everything else that it will be in a universe of its own. It will be a universe of its own,”* a teenage boy in a yellow spacesuit had said up on the hull of mighty Amoa, looking out on the space between the stars. Oga had not answered at that time. It would have scared the boy, and though he had discovered it himself on the long flight from Milius 1183, he did not properly understand it himself, and in that gap of comprehension, he too was afraid. Yes, he would have said. *And in that is our only hope.*

Long-range sensors chimed. A ship had emerged around the limb of the planet. Consciousness is too slow a tool for the pitiless mathematics of space. In the split second that the ship’s course, design, and drive signature had registered on Oga’s higher cognitions, his autonomic systems had plotted course, fuel reserves, and engaged the scalarity drive. At a thousand gees, he pulled away from Tejaphay. Manipulating space-time so close to the planet would send gravity waves rippling through it like a struck gong. Enormous slow tides would circle the globe; the space elevator would flex like a crackled whip. Nothing to be done. It was instinct alone and by instinct he lived, for here came the missiles. Twenty nanotoc warheads on hypergee drives, wiping out his entire rearward vision in a white glare of lightweight MaM engines, but not before he had felt on his skin sensors the unmistakable harmonies of an Enemy deep-space scoopfield going up.

The missiles had the legs, but Oga had the stamina. He had calculated it thus. The numbers still came to him. Looking back at the blue speck into which Tejaphay had dwindled, he saw the engine-sparks of the missiles wink out one after the other. And now he could be sure that the strategy, devised in nanoseconds, would pay off. The warship was chasing him. He

would lead it away from the Aeo Taea fleet. But this would be no long stern chase over the light decades. He did not have the fuel for that, nor the inclination. Without fuel, without weapons, he knew he must end it. For that, he needed space.

It was the same ship. The drive field harmonics, the spectrum of the fusion flame, the timbre of the radar images that he so gently, kiss-soft, bounced off the pursuer's hull, even the configuration he had glimpsed as the ship rounded the planet and launched missiles. This was the same ship that had hunted him down all the years. Deep mysteries here. Time dilation would compress his planned course to subjective minutes and Oga needed time to find an answer.

The ship had known where he would go even as they bucked the stormy cape of the wandering neutron star. It had never even attempted to follow him; instead, it had always known that it must lay in a course that would whip it around to Tay. That meant that even as he escaped the holocaust at Milius 1183, it had known who he was, where he came from, had seen through the frozen layers of smart-ice to the Torben below. The ship had come from around the planet. It was an enemy ship, but not the Enemy. They would have boiled Tejaphay down to its iron heart. Long Oga contemplated these things as he looped out into the wilderness of the Oort cloud. Out there among the lonely ice, he reached a conclusion. He turned the ship over and burned the last of his reaction in a hypergee deceleration burn. The enemy ship responded immediately, but its ramjet drive was less powerful. It would be months, years even, before it could turn around to match orbits with him. He would be ready then. The edge of the field brushed Oga as he decelerated at fifteen hundred gravities and he used his external sensors to modulate a message on the huge web, a million kilometers across: *I surrender*.

Gigayears ago, before the star was born, the two comets had met and entered into their far, cold marriage. Beyond the dramas and attractions of the dust cloud that coalesced into Tay and Tejaphay and Bephis, all the twelve planets of the solar system, they maintained their fixed-grin gazes on each other, locked in orbit around a mutual center of gravity where a permanent free-floating haze of ice crystals hovered, a fraction of a Kelvin above absolute zero. Hidden amongst them, and as cold and seemingly as

dead, was the splintership. Oga shivered. The cold was more than—on the limits of even his malleable form. Within their thermal casing, his motes moved as slowly as Aeo Taea Parents. He felt old as this ice and as weary. He looked up into the gap between ice worlds. The husband-comet floated above his head like a halo. He could have leaped to it in a thought.

Lights against the starlight twinkle of the floating ice storm. A sudden occlusion. The Enemy was here. Oga waited, feeling every targeting sensor trained on him.

*No, you won't, will you? Because you have to know.*

A shadow detached itself from the black ship, darkest on dark, and looped around the comet. It would be a parliament of self-assembling motes like himself. Oga had worked out decades before that Enemy and Anpreen were one and the same, sprung from the same nanotechnological seed when they attained Class Two status. Theirs was a civil war. *In the Clade, all war was civil war*, Oga thought. Panhumanity was all there was. More like a family feud. Yes, those were the bloodiest fights of all. No quarter and no forgiveness.

The man came walking around the small curve of the comet, kicking up shards of ice crystals from his grip soles. Oga recognized him. He was meant to. He had designed himself so that he would be instantly recognizable, too. He bowed, in the distances of the Oort cloud.

“Torben Reris Orhum Fejannan Kekjay Prus Rejmer Serejen Nejben, sir.”

The briefest nod of a head, a gesture of hours in the slow-motion hypercold.

“Torben. I’m not familiar with that name.”

“Perhaps we should use the name most familiar to you. That would be Serejen, or perhaps Fejannen, I was in that Aspect when we last met. I would have hoped you still remembered the old etiquette.”

“I find I remember too much these days. Forgetting is a choice since I was improved. And a chore. What do they call you now?”

“Oga.”

“Oga it shall be, then.”

“And what do they call *you* now?”

The man looked up into the icy gap between worldlets. *He has remembered himself well*, Oga thought. *The slight portliness, the child-*

*chubby features, like a boy who never grew up. As he says, forgetting is a chore.*

“The same thing they always have: Cjatay.”

“Tell me your story then, Cjatay. This was never your fight, or my fight.”

“You left her.”

“She left *me*, I recall, and, like you, I forget very little these days. I can see the note still; I could recreate it for you, but it would be a scandalous waste of energy and resources. She went to you.”

“It was never me. It was the cause.”

“Do you truly believe that?”

Cjatay gave a glacial shrug.

“We made independent contact with them when they came. The Council of governments was divided, all over the place, no coherent approach or strategy. ‘Leave us alone. We’re not part of this.’ But there’s no neutrality in these things. We had let them use our system’s water. We had the space elevator they built for us, there was the price, there was the blood money. We knew it would never work—our hope was that we could convince them that some of us had always stood against the Anpreen. They torched Tay anyway, but they gave us a deal. They’d let us survive as a species if some of us joined them on their crusade.”

“They *are* the Anpreen.”

“*Were* the Anpreen. I know. They took me to pieces. They made us into something else. Better, I think. All of us, there were twenty-four of us. Twenty-four, that was all the good people of Tay, in their eyes. Everyone who was worth saving.”

“And Puzhay?”

“She died. She was caught in the Arphan conflagration. She went there from Jann to be with her parents. It always was an oil town. They melted it to slag.”

“But you blame me.”

“You are all that’s left.”

“I don’t believe that. I think it was always personal. I think it was always revenge.”

“You still exist.”

“That’s because you don’t have all the answers yet.”

“We know the kind of creatures we’ve become; what answers can I not know?”

Oga dipped his head, then looked up to the halo moon, so close he could almost touch it.

‘Do you want me to show you what they fear so much?’

There was no need for the lift of the hand, the conjuror’s gesture; the pieces of his ship-self Oga had seeded so painstakingly through the wife-comet’s structure were part of his extended body. *But I do make magic here*, he thought. He dropped his hand. The star-speckled sky turned white, hard painful white, as if the light of every star were arriving at once. *An Olbers sky*, Oga remembered from his days in the turrets and cloisters of Jann. And as the light grew intolerable, it ended. Blackness, embedding, huge and comforting. The dark of death. Then Oga’s eyes grew familiar with the dark, and, though it was the plan and always had been the plan, he felt a plaint of awe as he saw ten thousand galaxies resolve out of the Olbers dazzle. And he knew that Cjatay saw the same.

“Where are we? What have you done?”

“We are somewhere in the region of two hundred thirty million light-years outside our local group of galaxies, more precisely, on the periphery of the cosmological galactic supercluster known as the Great Attractor. I made some refinements to the scalarity drive unit to operate in a one dimensional array.”

“Faster-than-light travel,” Cjatay said, his upturned face silvered with the light of the ten thousand galaxies of the Great Attractor.

“No, you still don’t see it,” Oga said, and again turned the universe white. Now when he flicked out of hyperscalarity, the sky was dark and starless but for three vast streams of milky light that met in a triskelion hundreds of millions of light-years across.

“We are within the Bootes Supervoid,” Oga said. “It is so vast that if our own galaxy were in the center of it, we would think ourselves alone and that our galaxy was the entire universe. Before us are the Lyman alpha-blobs, three conjoined galaxy filaments. These are the largest structures in the universe. On scales larger than this, structure becomes random and grainy. We become grey. These are the last grand vistas, this is the end of greatness.”

“Of course, the expansion of space is not limited by lightspeed,” Cjatay said.

“Still you don’t understand.” A third time, Oga generated the dark energy from the ice beneath his feet and focused it into a narrow beam between the wife-comet and its unimaginably distant husband. *Two particles in contact will remain in quantum entanglement no matter how far they are removed*, Oga thought. *And is that true also for lives?* He dismissed the scalarity generator and brought them out in blackness. Complete, impenetrable, all-enfolding blackness, without a photon of light.

“Do you understand where I have brought you?”

“You’ve taken us beyond the visible horizon,” Cjatay said. “You’ve pushed space so far that the light from the rest of the universe has not had time to reach us. We are isolated from every other part of reality. In a philosophical sense, we are a universe in ourselves.”

“That was what they feared? You feared?”

“That the scalarity drive had the potential to be turned into a weapon of unimaginable power? Oh yes. The ability to remove any enemy from reach, to banish them beyond the edge of the universe. To exile them from the universe itself, instantly and irrevocably.”

“Yes, I can understand that, and that you did what you did altruistically. They were moral genocides. But our intention was never to use it as a weapon—if it had been, wouldn’t we have used it on you?”

Silence in the darkness beyond dark.

“Explain, then.”

“I have one more demonstration.”

The mathematics were critical now. The scalarity generator devoured cometary mass voraciously. If there were not enough left to allow him to return them home... Trust number, Oga. You always have. Beyond the edge of the universe, all you have is number. There was no sensation, no way of perceiving when he activated and deactivated the scalarity field, except by number. For an instant, Oga feared number had failed him, a first and fatal betrayal. Then light blazed down on to the dark ice. A single blinding star shone in the absolute blackness.

“What is that?”

“I pushed a single proton beyond the horizon of this horizon. I pushed it so far that space and time tore.”

“So I’m looking at...”

“The light of creation. That is an entire universe, new born. A new big bang. A young man once said to me, ‘Every particle will be so far from everything else that it will be in a universe of its own. It will be a universe of its own.’ An extended object like this comet, or bodies, is too gross, but in a single photon, quantum fluctuations will turn it into an entire universe in waiting.”

The two men looked up a long time into the nascent light, the surface of the fireball seething with physical laws and forces boiling out. *Now you understand*, Oga thought. *It’s not a weapon. It’s the way out. The way past the death of the universe. Out there beyond the horizon, we can bud off new universes, and universes from those universes, forever. Intelligence has the last word. We won’t die alone in the cold and the dark.* He felt the light of the infant universe on his face, then said, “I think we probably should be getting back. If my calculations are correct—and there is a significant margin of error—this fireball will shortly undergo a phase transition as dark energy separates out and will undergo catastrophic expansion. I don’t think that the environs of an early universe would be a very good place for us to be.”

He saw portly Cjatay smile.

“Take me home, then. I’m cold and I’m tired of being a god.”

“Are we gods?”

Cjatay nodded at the microverse.

“I think so. No, I know I would want to be a man again.”

Oga thought of his own selves and lives, his bodies and natures. Flesh indwelled by many personalities, then one personality—one aggregate of experience and memory—in bodies liquid, starship, nanotechnological. And he *was* tired, so terribly tired beyond the universe, centuries away from all that he had known and loved. All except this one, his enemy.

“Tejaphay is no place for children.”

“Agreed. We could rebuild Tay.”

“It would be a work of centuries.”

“We could use the Aeoa Parents. They have plenty of time.”

Now Cjatay laughed.

“I have to trust you now, don’t I? I could have vaporized you back there, blown this place to atoms with my missiles. And now you create an



entire universe...”

“And the Enemy? They’ll come again.”

“You’ll be ready for them, like you were ready for me. After all, I am still the enemy.”

The surface of the bubble of universe seemed to be in more frenetic motion now. The light was dimming fast.

“Let’s go then,” Cjatay said.

“Yes,” Oga said. “Let’s go home.”

**Oga, returning**

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*Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo!*

# About the Author

Ian McDonald was born in 1960 in Manchester, England, to an Irish mother and a Scottish father. He moved with his family to Northern Ireland in 1965. He used to live in a house built in the back garden of C. S. Lewis's childhood home but has since moved to central Belfast, where he now lives, exploring interests like cats, contemplative religion, bonsai, bicycles, and comic-book collecting. He debuted in 1982 with the short story "The Island of the Dead" in the short-lived British magazine *Extro*. His first novel, *Desolation Road*, was published in 1988. Other works include *King of Morning*, *Queen of Day* (winner of the Philip K. Dick Award), *River of Gods*, *The Dervish House* (both of which won British Science Fiction Association Awards), the graphic novel *Kling Klang Klatch*, and many more. His most recent publications are *Planesrunner* and *Be My Enemy*, books one and two of the Everness series for younger readers (though older readers will find them a ball of fun, as well). Ian worked in television development for sixteen years, but is glad to be back to writing fulltime.

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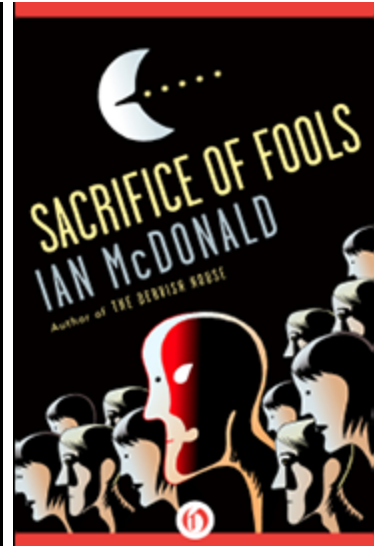
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